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# A FASHIONABLE MARRIAGE

By

MRS ALEXANDER FRASER

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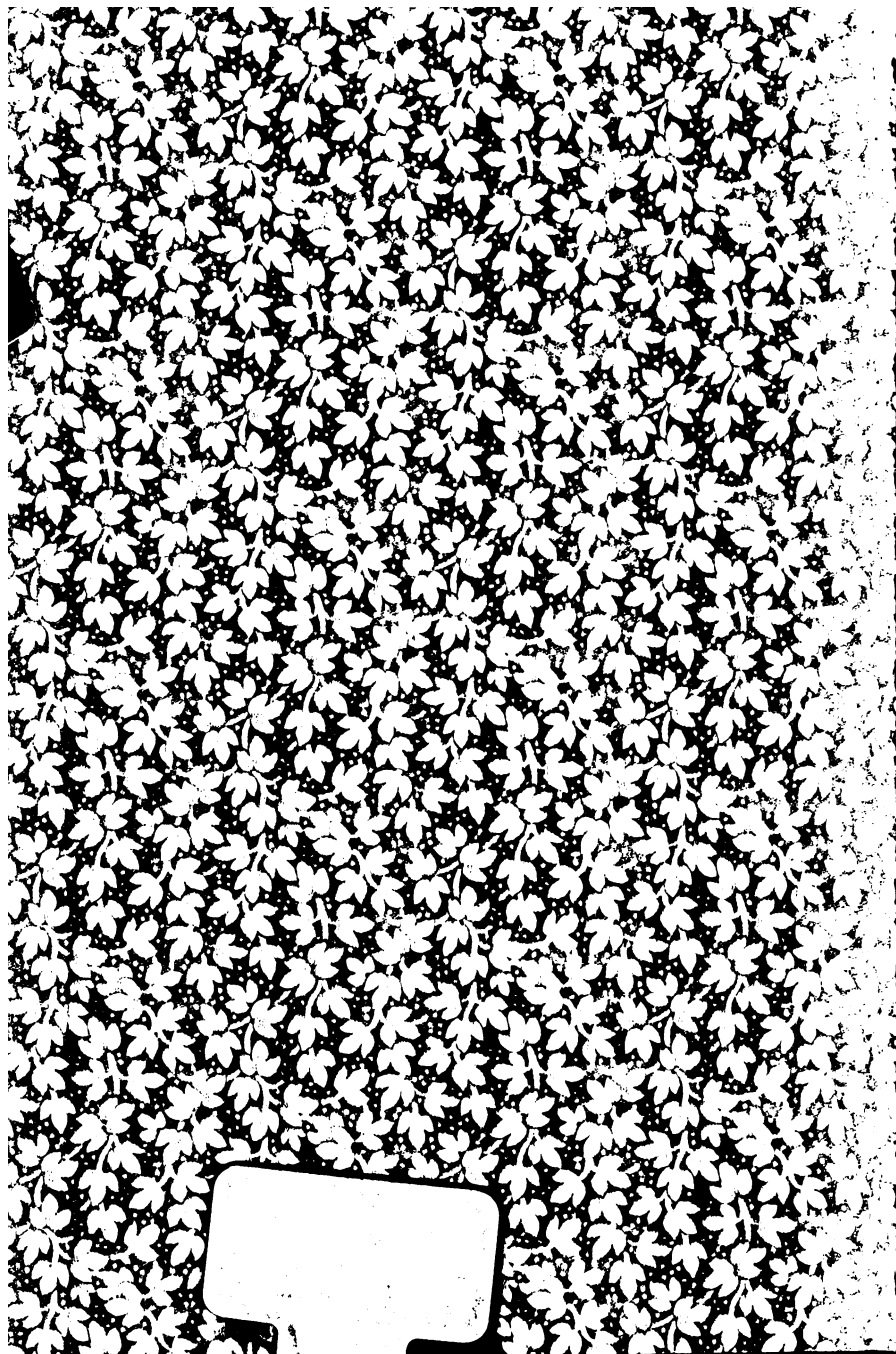
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"Man's Love is of Man's Life  
a Thing Apart"







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**A FASHIONABLE MARRIAGE.**



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**F. V. WHITE & CO.,**  
**31, Southampton Street, Strand.**

# A FASHIONABLE MARRIAGE.

BY

MRS. ALEXANDER FRASER,

AUTHOR OF "HER FLIGHTED TROTH;" "A PROFESSIONAL BEAUTY;"

"GUARDIAN AND LOVER;" "A FATAL PASSION;"

"A PRESS OF 1882," ETC., ETC.

*IN THREE VOLUMES.*

VOL. III.

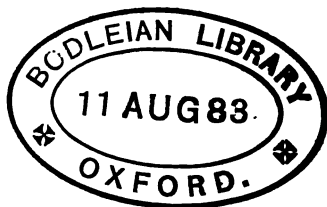
"Man's love is of man's life a thing apart—  
'Tis woman's whole existence."

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## CHAPTER I.

### BELLA GOES TO THE POINT.

“Life and lust  
Forsake thee, and the face of thy delight  
And underfoot the heavy hour shows dust  
And overhead strange weathers burn and bite,  
And where the red was, lo! the bloodless white,  
And where truth was, the likeness of a liar,  
And where day was, the likeness of the night,  
This is the end of every man's desire.”

**B**ERTIE comes the next day, a sorry young diplomate! The light of other days has faded, and melancholy marks him for her own. Gone is the winsome sunny look in his eyes so like blue harebells; gone the laugh on his handsome mouth, and the buoyant step, and the tongue that in other days wagged by the hour.

Altogether he is very unsatisfactory to look at and to speak to, Bella thinks, as she surveys him critically through her sandy lashes, and finds him lean and limp and lugubrious.

She has looked forward, too, with both pleasure and a triumphant sense of having played a trump card, when she summoned him to assist at the council of three, a *tria juncta in uno*, who were to be the saviours of Lord Ennisford's morals.

Her face is still more blank when he announces that he must have his "diggings" in Belgrave Square, or the *mater* will never forgive him.

Bertie, young as he is, and of all the Bramber blood perhaps the most honest and loyal and true, is yet swayed in this arrangement by a motive he does not care to avow, namely, that in the paternal

mansion he will be more his own master, and the master of his latchkey, than he would be in Charles Street, with Bella's cat-like eyes looking as if they were forever on the alert and the watch.

And Bertie wants liberty—liberty to spend as many hours as fate will give him—beautiful, rosy, delicious hours—at the feet of the woman to whom he has yielded up his soul without reservation—

"And where truth was, the likeness of a liar,

\* \* \*

This is the end of every man's desire !

is an aphorism that does not occur to him. Why should it? He is young and foolish, and warm, and dreadfully in love. And it is not despair that has made him lean and limp and lugubrious, but simply the misery of absence. Even now, as he realises that he is only divided by a few



streets from her, his blood begins to leap once more, and his spirit waxes high.

Lord Ennisford gives a little start when the lithe boyish figure, arrayed in an irreproachable tweed suit, walks into the room. It may be that even a shade of white passes over his cheek, but if so, he rallies in the twinkling of an eye and is really pleased to see his young brother's face, as he administers a hearty fraternal slap on his back."

"Going to stay long, Bertie!"

"Don't know! *Cela dépend*," and the colour rushes over the fair skin, as Bertie thinks to himself what that "*Cela dépend*" means.

It means paradise without a serpent, heaven without purgatory, intense pleasure, intense reciprocity, intense everything which his foolish young heart longs for, and which

he is sure his foolish young heart will have.

And when Lord Ennisford sees that red colour betokening so much feeling, so much hope, he frowns unmistakeably behind a newspaper, and jumping up declares abruptly that he is due at the House.

By-and-by, when luncheon is over, and love-sick though he is, Bertie, with the healthy appetite of unripe years, has done ample justice to the well-cooked viandands, washed down his sweetbread and mayonnaise with a full tumbler of iced Roederer, Bella carries him off in her clutches to her work-room, as she calls it.

It is a *fac-simile*, almost, of the room she occupied in Belgrave Square, with its ponderous books, its portfolios, and its basket of coarse garments, and altogether not the surroundings to suit Bertie's tastes

and blue eyes, that, with the proclivities of the Bramber blood, love to rest on everything that savours of the refined and the beautiful.

But he knows of old that it is useless to resist when Bella will; so settling himself on the only lounge in the room, and drawing another chair for his feet, the young Sybarite puts an excellent cigar between his well-cut lips, and prepares to listen.

Bella, daring and defiant, is yet of a shifty nature; so she meanders round the point whilst she finishes herring-boning a rational garment for one of her pet poor.

“Getting on, Bertie?”

“Tol lol.”

“Flush?”

“Flush! Ye gods!”

“Germans are proverbially poor, like

church mice! There's no rich wives to be found in Vienna, I suppose?"

"I don't know, I never looked!" Bertie answers indifferently, blowing a blue ring of smoke right into her face.

But Bella doesn't mind tobacco; she rather likes it, for her tastes are masculine, like her appearance.

"Making that thing for yourself, Bella?" he asks, with a twinkle in his eye. "It would suit you, you were meant for a man, you know."

"Was I? I wish I had been a man, then I need not have asked anyone's assistance!" she says, with her usual mystery, to which Bertie is so accustomed, that he never heeds.

"Why? Has anyone been insulting you? You look more formidable than ever, Bella; what sized gloves do you take—tens?"

She gives him a cool level look which makes him feel rather small for a moment, but he quickly revives.

"I say, Bella! did you send for me all the way to Vienna to give my advice on Lady Harbarton's invention?"

"Has the Duchess written you anything about marrying, Bertie?"

"Marrying? No, marriages are made in heaven, or in hell, my dear, and as their origin is so uncertain, I don't care about trying my chance."

"But your mother wants you to try and like Miss Latimer, Bertie. What does it matter who a man marries? He sees less of his wife than any other woman, and Miss Latimer is ——."

"Damn Miss Latimer."

It is evident that Bertie is quite disinclined to marry, even though his finances

require it, *ergo*, he is in love with that Aylmer woman; and therefore will be a strong ally after all. So Bella opens her campaign with "Frances is so—so sorry she cannot come down to-day, Bertie.

Bertie is quite fond of his sister-in-law, though he looks upon her as rather dull, with not a scrap of "go," so he says, sympathisingly enough,

"I hope Frances is not ill?"

"Well, no, perhaps not exactly ill, that is, bodily—but very, very ill in mind, you know," she answers in slow disjointed words and in a hushed voice.

Instinct is much greater at times than at others with all of us, and young, gay, and thoughtless, Bertie had not used to heed the premonitory voice. But love-sick, sobered, and sometimes doubting, Bertie

gives a start as he listens, and drops his lighted cigar into Bella's big basket, setting an old woman's night-cap, in a semi-finished condition, ablaze. But even this calamity fails to rouse or vex Bella, as it might have done at any other moment. She quietly takes a glass of water, pours it on to the smouldering head-gear, and resumes her discourse.

"You see, Bertie, Ennisford *can't* keep steady; he is not a bit steadier now than when he was a bachelor," she announces with a solemn face. "It is not in him, I suppose, and Frances has found out that he has a *liaison* with another woman, and is fretting herself to fiddle strings about it. I believe she will kill herself by-and-by. I have done my best; I have talked to both her and Ennisford, but one might as well talk to the moon. I cannot bear to stay

here and see everything going to the dogs like this, and all for what?—for the sake of an *intriguante's* pretty face ; for the sake of a woman whose name is bandied about all over town."

By the time she arrives at this, Bertie has raised himself to a bolt upright position, and has pushed his hair from his brow, and is pale to the lips.

"And who is this *intriguante* with a pretty face, this woman whose name is bandied about town," he asks slowly, almost in a whisper.

"*Lady Aylmer.*"

Then this boyish nature asserts itself.

Instead of listening to this beloved name with the *sang froid* of a man of the world, or smiling down the agony in his heart, he springs off his seat and seizing Bella by the two arms, drags her, with the clutch



of a madman, where the full light of the window falls on her face.

"Now," he cries, "now that I can see whether you are telling me the truth—the whole unvarnished, horrible truth! Say all that over again; say that Ennisford is Lady Aylmer's *lover*—but be careful, Bella, for by God, if you lie now it will go hard with you!"

She shakes off his grip easily, and, though her sallow cheeks glow, she says, quietly and deliberately—

"Lord Ennisford is Lady Aylmer's lover."

And as the foul words come stunning his ears, they stun manliness as well. Beside himself with misery, jealousy, anger, he lifts his arm and deals her a blow that makes her sway back.

"What proof; what proof?" he cries. "I know you, Bella; I know your un-

scrupulous nature, that will do anything to serve some purpose or arrive at some wish."

"I have the proof, but will keep it to myself at present, and let you eat out your heart in fear and doubt. It will be a lesson for giving me that cowardly blow," she answers, white as a sheet and with a cold gleam in her pale grey eyes.

Then Bertie casts himself down on his knees before her, and looks up into her face with moist, beseeching eyes. "Forgive me, Bella, I didn't mean to forget myself like that, but I was mad, mad! thinking your words might be true. Oh, Bella, if you knew what she is to me; if you knew how I love her, how that love is sapping my very life—you would understand; you would forgive. Tell me, for

God's sake, it is only a surmise on your part—that it is not true!”

“It is not a surmise, and is true!” she answers, with cold cruelty, and yet, in spite of his conduct to herself she is sorry for him, sorry for this bonnie boy, whose *insouciant*, happy, hopeful, amiable nature has been dashed away by this poisonous love.

“It is true?” he repeats, dreamily.

“Quite true!”

Then Bertie says no more to her; he simply walks out of the room, catches up his hat in the hall, and in another moment is bowling along as fast as a hansom can take him to Stanhope Street.

It is but half-past three—too late and too early for the Park, so he will find her at home, and as he remembers that his brother is at the House, he thanks God.

"I wouldn't like to meet him until I have heard from her own lips the truth. I believe I should have been a second Cain," he mutters through his strong white teeth.



## CHAPTER II.

### A TIGER TO A TAME CAT.

" Oh, lips that mine have grown into,  
Like April's kissing May ;  
O, fervent eyelids, letting through  
Those eyes the greenest of things blue,  
The bluest of things grey ! "

**L**ADY AYLMER, tall and slender, and as white as a lily, as lovely as a star, lies back on her sofa and does not even start when the servant throws open the door and announces—" Lord Herbert Graham," though perchance a keen eye might detect a faint increase of pallor on her cheek.

She has a bunch of roses in her hand—rare flowers, some red as blood, some white as milk, and some golden-hearted ; and as

she slowly rises, she puts them carefully into a little Dresden vase that stands on the table beside her before she extends a hand to her visitor.

And Bertie, at the sight of her, forgets everything save that she is here and he is with her.

“Edith!” he whispers; “Edith!”

But Edith, who should have been christened Faustine—

“A queen, whose kingdom ebbs and shifts  
Each week”—

has no answering glance of eagerness in her great purple eyes, or in her manner, fair though he is in his young winsome beauty, loving as he is in his honest boyish heart. She wishes him at Hong-Kong—anywhere save in Stanhope Street, and the sapphire eyes are ice and the manners perfect in their well-bred languor. There is

only one merit in him now, and that is his resemblance to another man.

"Are you not glad to see me?" he asks simply; and common-place as his words are, she knows that they come straight from a heart that is full of her.

But what does she care? She has so many hearts full of her, and one more or one less can matter nothing.

"No! I hate being surprised, it has an uncomfortable sensation about it, and you know I love comfort. If you had let me know you were coming I might have got up quite a little gushing scene of welcome," she says, carelessly, taking out her bunch of roses again and laying them against her lips tenderly.

They are an offering from Lord Ennisford.

And as Bertie watches her, he longs

to crush the hateful blossoms that she caresses, feeling that for one touch of her he would give up everything—everything.

“Why do you waste your caresses on those flowers?—They don’t appreciate it!”

She laughs.

“And you would. Well, you see, *mon ami*, one can get tired of a man, but of flowers—never!”

Bertie clenches his teeth to suppress the bitter words that bubble to his lips.

“Edith, why do you treat me so? It isn’t possible that any one else has taken my place, for if so——”

He pauses, a wild look almost in his eyes, and his lips trembling.

“If so——”

“I’ll shoot him, or—myself,” he says, with anguish in every feature.

“Silly!” she answers, contemptuously,



but all the same she feels rather uncomfortable. The young fool, as she calls him, is quite capable of carrying out his threat.

Bertie is in the toils—never did stupid fly flutter more hopelessly in spider's web. Will the spider fasten her fangs and suck the life-blood from her victim, or will she spare the boy misery, maybe, crime.

He cannot believe even now that she has ceased to care for him. He dare not break the dream on which he has lived these last months, nor look on them as a snare—a delusion of the devil.

“Before I went to Vienna you swore you cared for me more than for any other man, Edith. Was it true, or was it—not?” he asks, growing imperious, and drawing up his slight figure with all the haughtiness of his race; and so he re-

sembles his brother even more, for Lord Ennisford is taller, stronger built, and carries his head like a prince. Marking all this, unconsciously her voice softens as she answers dreamily—

“It was and it was—not!”

But he overlooks the tone in the cruel words, and with the colour rushing in torrents over his face, he cries—

“And you can answer me like this! me—whom you have led on and on to love you slavishly, madly, till you have made me a pitiable, miserable plaything in your hands; and I—I have believed in you, trusted in you, thought no one like you in the world; I have gone down on my knees and thanked God for your love, Edith, and now——”

“And now you are awake—awake as we all are some time or other to the follies

of our youth!" she says, with a little smile.

That smile is the one straw that broke the camel's back.

"Good God!" he exclaims, his blue eyes glaring at her. "Women are called gentle—loving! For cold-blooded cruelty, for passionate devilment, you women are to men what a hawk is to a dove—a tiger to a tame cat!"

She shrugs her shoulders and half droops her lids, settling herself more comfortably, as if resigned to all he has to say.

For one instant he looks at her anxiously and his whole face seems to quiver as he looks. Then his mood changes, and throwing himself down, he grovels at her feet.

"Edith, Edith, tell me you are not

changed! Tell me you care for me still! I don't ask you to love me as I love you, Edith, for it is such horrible torture, such pain; but a little, a little; *only ever so much more than you do any other man!*"

"I cannot deceive you," she says, making up her mind to crush the nuisance this flirtation has become to her, no matter what weapons she uses to slay his love, so long as it is done. "If I have unwittingly made you believe that I cared for you, Bertie, forgive me. The only thing we can do is not to meet, and absence will make you forget the past!"

Once more he regards her steadily.

The exquisite face which haunts him night and day is like Richelieu's waxen mask. There is no pity or relenting in the sapphire eyes, and he knows now that the scarlet lips that have maddened him

by their touch in the days that are gone will never more be lifted to his caress.

*“Forget the past!”*

Why, before he does that he must *die*, for this woman, false, selfish, treacherous as she is, is life of his life, and without her must come—death.

Yes! he knew it all now. Bella did not lie!

“I see,” he says, in a very low voice that has neither wrath nor rancour in it—the strength of his love lifts him far above such feelings—but there rings in every tone such utter, utter pain that even her callous ears shrink a little from the sound. “I see! and after all what could I expect? It is such women as you who hurt men, and make them traitors to faith, defaulters in honour, unbelievers in everything good and holy. It is such women as you who

drain a man of heart and soul, and smile while you work the destruction. I shall go back to-morrow to Vienna, Edith. I will never trouble you more, but before I go I want to leave my only care, my last request to you. Imagine that I am going to leave the world, and that I make you executrix of my will. Will you accept the trust?"

She bends her head, wondering what craze this is

"My great anxiety is for my brother—for Ennisford. I want to ask your best offices for him."

He watches her as he says this, and sees her throw her head back impatiently, while her lips curl and her cheeks flush, and her hand with which she has taken up a fan gives such a jerk, that the brittle toy is shattered to atoms.

"I did not know you were your brother's keeper," she replies, with a forced laugh.

"I wish I were! If I could only save his wife from the misery which is gathering round her; if I could only save his children from the shame and disgrace which I see looming on their devoted heads. Edith, it seems an out of the way thing to do, in these days, almost like a leaf out of an old melodrama; but I want you *for once* to use your influence for *good*. I want *you* to *convince* Ennisford he is mad, *wicked*, to sacrifice everything to *love*."

*Love!*

Hard woman, unscrupulous, and almost worn out with the old, old game. A woman who, in her *vie orageuse* has nearly reached the "pale." The word *love* in conjunction with Lord Ennisford has the power to bring as

sweet and pure a blush to her cheeks as to a maiden of seventeen, and a soft light to her eye. Then she suddenly remembers that this boy's hand, weak as it may be, can yet wrench away from her the fruit half tasted, and her face grows hard and set, and drawing her lids lower to hide the fierceness in her eyes, her voice shakes with supreme but suppressed passion, "What do you mean? Will you explain yourself more clearly please?"

"Is it necessary? Will you force me to say that which I would rather leave unsaid? Don't you know that it is *you* who have enslaved him; don't you know that he would wait for you and follow you wherever you beckoned? And don't you know that unless you choose to dismiss him from his thankless bondage, he isn't a free agent? His passion for you will ruin



him and his wife and his children. Great heavens! you surely can have some pity for *them*?"

But he may as well appeal to the table groaning under its *bric-bracerie* as to this *belle dame sans merci*, this hawk, this serpent who sits silent, but resolved to hold on until her passion has died a natural death.

"I will not listen to any more of this!" She flashes angrily at last. "And if you only come here to insult me, to heap indignities on my head, it would be as well if you kept away. I listen to no one's counsel. The approval of my own conscience is all I want," she adds, loftily.

Bertie looks at her sorrowfully, then, taking up his hat, he reaches the door, but with a wild impulse rushes back.

"Edith, one word more! Will you listen

to me? Will you give Ennisford up, for my sake?"

"For your sake," she says, with a mocking laugh.

"For your own sake then; even you, heartless as you are, would not care to have murder on your soul."

"Murder on my soul! Good Heavens! one would think we were rehearsing a scene in a transpontine theatre. Bertie, have you been drinking?"

"Drinking! Yes, I suppose I am drunk," he answers, dreamily, passing his hand over his forehead as if he were bewildered. "Drunk, not with wine, but with your beauty. Drunk with a mad desire that no other man shall pluck kisses from those lips that I have found so sweet—so sweet, and so poisonous too! Drunk with the bitter thought that I am looking my

last, my very last, perhaps, on the face that has spoiled my life for me. Do you hear, Edith?"

"I hear," she says, in a hard voice. "And I wonder, for I never thought a man's folly could reach a height like this."

"*Folly* is it? Well then, listen to me, *this folly will end my life, the hour that it links yours to Ennisford's*," he says under his breath, in a concentrated voice; and just for a moment she is frightened and shrinks back, but women with splendid physiques like hers, do not understand the meaning of nerves.

"Now you, know all about it, Edith. Good bye! Come, you have often kissed me before, one kiss more or less when many are given won't harm anyone. Will you kiss me and bid me God speed on my long, long journey?"

She stares at him one moment; some strange sentiment is at work within her. *This* time it is not a bad one. No passion lives in it, only a sort of curious feeling that *must* be obeyed. So she kisses him on his mouth.

"Now, go," she says.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I thought you had seen nothing of Lady Aylmer, yet Bella tells me you have?" Bertie says feverishly to his brother, the evening of the same day. He has been drinking freely, and two red spots of colour glow on his cheeks, more startling in their effect from the excessive pallor that goes round his mouth.

"Did I tell you that I hadn't," Lord Ennisford replies lightly, striking a fusee. "Don't think I did. I have met her three or four times lately."

"Pity that you haven't acted up to all the precepts you favoured me with, when I spoke to you about her in Paris," Bertie rejoins, with a sneer. "I'll tell you what, Mansford, I hate cant in anyone. You lectured me about that woman, and preached about her as the parson does of the bottomless pit, and then you carry on with her yourself."

"Did I say that I had fallen in love with her? Don't you see the difference in our cases, my boy? Tiger hunting is capital sport, but you must kill the tiger, he mustn't kill you. One may look down the crater of a volcano *pour s'amuser*, but one is not such an arrant ass as to fling oneself headlong down it."

"Hang your cold-blooded sophistry," Bertie says, surlily; "besides, it's all put on; it's a cloak for treachery; it's a devil's

own lie ; you pretend to have some affection for me, and then you go and make love to Lady Aylmer, sneak into her liking, and know very well that you are gone mad on her yourself."

"How you rave, youngster ; it's a compliment, I fancy, to the Guv.'s excellent wine ! I did not think you were so easily taken in—by Jove ! It's Bella who has been cramming you with all this rubbish, for ulterior reasons of her own. I should have thought you would have been up to her game before now. She's a cat !"

"Then you mean to say that you *don't* make love to Lady Aylmer ?" Bertie asks point blank, and hope is such a father to belief that he is staggered a little.

Lord Ennisford has the grace to hesitate a moment ; it even enters his head to make a clean breast of it, but something in the

flushed boyish face and glaring eyes, stops him, and equivocation is his only course.

"I make love to every pretty face, I am sorry to say ; it is my nature to. Did you ever know a Bramber to be a Sir Galahad ? *Au contraire*, we are about as inflammable a race as the Turks, and if we could we would have fifty wives instead of one I believe ! Lady Aylmer"—he pauses and knocks the ashes off his cigar—"is wonderfully handsome, talks well, dresses well—which, by-the-by, is more than can be said about half the women in town—she's a splendid actress in private life, works up the agony capitally, does the *tendresse* to a nicety, doesn't overdo it, but it is a *tendresse* that ends in a laugh, a dream, a kiss, I fancy. As for *l'amour serieux*, there is only one person she really cares a rap about, and that is not *you*, Bertie, nor *me*, but—herself."

“What new and refreshing modesty,” cries Bertie, in undisguised wrath. “You don’t do yourself justice as usual; you detract from the glory of your conquest!”

“I speak the truth and nothing but the truth; women like Lady Aylmer don’t go in for much sentiment, it is a waste of time, and it does not pay; but it is getting late, and I must be going off I suppose, or Frances will be thinking I have eloped, or else Bella will tell her I have. Good-night, Bertie.”

But Bertie does not extend a hand.

“Pshaw! You are like the naughty boy that cried for the moon! I shall fancy you are jealous if you look so savage. Good-night.”

“Good-bye,” Bertie answers, and in spite of his jealous anger, he chokes back a sort of sob as his brother’s tall figure recedes from view, and he remembers a few years



back when Ennisford was his model, his paragon, his protector. But then—*no woman's face had come between them.*

As Lord Ennisford walks through Belgrave Square, his assumed carelessness vanishes, and his brow contracts with a frown. There is a passionate revolt within him against the part he has chosen to play, a bitter heart-sickness upon him. It hurts him horribly that he will seem treacherous in his young brother's eyes. Bertie has always been his favourite, chiefly, perhaps, because he has been flattered by the boy's absolute devotion and admiration. His future rises up rather blackly, and in spite of the vista of love and passion which he fancies opens so widely, he almost wishes that he had never looked on Lady Aylmer's dangerous face or lived in the fool's paradise of her presence.

But it is rather late at this eleventh hour to regret. A weak man, wanting backbone, as Bella had said, and not overweighted with principle, he looks on the state of affairs with an eye more to its discomfort, its scandal, its bother, than to its *sin*.

For sin is such an obsolete and ugly word, not to be found in fashionable vocabulary. Men of Lord Ennisford's stamp realise the pleasantness of it, the piquancy of it, even the disagreeables of it occasionally; but they call it by any other name than the right one, which might startle them and interfere with the full flavour of the forbidden fruit.

*Oderunt peccare boni, virtutis amore* is a thing of the past.

## CHAPTER III.

### A HAWK TO A DOVE.

"What the years mean—how time dies and is not slain,  
How love grows and laughs and dies and wanes again;  
These were things she came to know—and take their measure,  
When the play was played out so—for one man's pleasure!"

**L**ADY AYLMER has another visitor  
on this same day.

She still lounges on her rich velvet *canapé*, toying with her roses and with the glittering fragments of her fan lying at her feet, while she thinks of Bertie—more, too, than she has thought of him for weeks—nay, in these very last weeks, so full of a new love, she has well-nigh forgotten the existence of the fair-haired, blue-eyed boy, whom she has first caressed and then thrown over with the devilment of her nature.

To judge from the decided frown that puckers her ivory brow, and the stormy look in her purple orbs, her thoughts are none of the pleasantest either, when the servant (who is new, and not quite up in his duty of saying "Not at home" to the right people) throws open the door, and announces solemnly,

"A Lady."

"A Gentleman" is no uncommon thing in this *bijou* house in Stanhope Street; but Lady Aylmer, though she is of high estate in the world and has carriages and horses and fine linen and luxury, and last, but not least, a husband—somewhere—is not yet much favoured with lady callers, unless it happens to be Mrs. Washington Drake, or some other being of the same calibre; so she lifts up two large surprised eyes and sees a woman of medium height, slightly made, so slightly

that her figure gives an impression of sweet seventeen.

She wears a dress of rich black silk—but it is very plainly, even dowdily made—with a long loose cloak partially concealing its deficiencies.

It is next to impossible to distinguish the features of a face that is hidden by a thick lace veil—that, however, gives a general sort of idea that the face is small and oval, and altogether somewhat insignificant.

By each hand she holds a child, which is certainly suggestive of the professional mendicant style; but the elder, a boy of about five years, is habited in a picturesque blue velvet suit, and, with his long fair curls, looks like a miniature cavalier of Charles the First's time; while the girl, a perfect cherub, with big laughing eyes and spun-gold hair wears a little frock from some

Rue de la Paix atelier—so dainty and deft are its knots of ribbons and ruchings of lace.

In her intense astonishment Lady Aylmer forgets to rise, but sits upright and is ill-bred enough to give a stare of surprise. What is this woman? she wonders, not a suppliant for alms, though the two little ones clinging to her hands present a vivid resemblance to street beggars, but the texture of her gown and the rich apparel of the children demonstrate plainly that finances are flourishing: an impostor—No! There is nothing of the professional cringe and whine in the thoroughbred but delicate little figure opposite, standing as if rooted to the mossy velvet pile. But there is not much time for guessing, for the woman suddenly throws back her veil, and Lady Aylmer fairly starts up in amazement as

she sees revealed the features of—*Lady Ennisford!*

It is not a visit of ceremony—she feels *that* at once—and to say that she feels at her ease would be a gross insult to womanhood—for she knows she is culpable, and she knows that that culpability is the sole cause of this visit.

“How ignorant! how *bizarre* of her! She has come to pitch into me about *him*, of course! She must have got *tête montée* over some old novel, like *Pamela*, or *Virtue rewarded!* I suppose.” These thoughts flash like lightning through her brain. Even as she moves slowly forward, her fragrant roses still in her hand, and, as she bends her head and makes a motion towards a chair to her visitor, she looks like an empress.

“Lady Aylmer! I heard all you said

about me to your friend at the House, the other night!" Lady Ennisford says, very slowly, so that she may hold in calmness the insurgent emotional vibrations of her voice. The commencement of her address is not promising, and fails to re-assure, and the hearer of it has the grace to blush over face and neck as she makes a little gesture of deprecation.

"I know your estimate of me as a woman and as the wife of Lord Ennisford, Lady Aylmer! I am afraid you will think me very ignorant in the world's ways when I tell you quite frankly that I was not angry with your verdict on me, for I have never held myself to be my husband's equal in any respect, save in my natural love of all that is pure and true! I wish I *were* different, for his sake"—she goes on with a wistful look, "I would I were as beautiful



as you are! But I am his wife—I love him and him only. I shall never, *never*, love any other man. I could never be the wife of any other man; and I am the mother of his children. You see, as a woman, my life begins and ends in him! I would live for him, and I would *die* for him! Can you put yourself in my place, Lady Aylmer? If so, how would you feel if you heard another woman—a stranger—speak of you as you spoke of me?”

“I should have wanted to kill her! I would have killed her if I could!” cries Lady Aylmer, melodramatically, clasping her pretty jewelled hands together, roses and all, and speaking with immense unction.

“Would you?” says a quiet, gentle voice—though the heart within beats to suffocation, and sickness at the possible chance of her mission failing. “Well! I wish you no

harm!—yet I do wish something of you, Lady Aylmer, wish it so much, that it must plead my excuse for intruding here!” And as she speaks she draws the children a little closer to her, and leans forward, in her intense earnestness—“*I want you to leave me what is mine!* This is all I ask! I would not rob you—I would not rob anyone, and in return I want only *my husband!*—the father of my children. If I cannot know him to be mine in fidelity, in singleness of love, what have I in this world? *Nothing.*”

“Have you, then, no confidence in him?” Lady Aylmer murmurs, pathetically, drifting helplessly into the first question that suggests itself, and feeling more confident. “What is his love worth if it is not proof against any test? Besides, I have a creed of my own, and I believe that no one can take

from us what is really ours, and that we can have no more love from any one than our nature calls out—even if there was no other woman in the world. You speak as if Lord Ennisford was at my mercy—as if I had nothing to do but to take him from you if I wished! If he is worthy of being all in all to you, how can you have so little faith in him?”

“I think that *you* know,” Lady Ennisford answers, to whom the fashionable jargon of the doctrine of affinity is an unknown alphabet, but whose clear eyes look into the purple depths of her rival’s with a divining light. “I think that you know! You ask me if I have no faith in my husband. I have had all faith in him. I have never loved anyone else, and know nothing of men save as I know them by *him*. Yet I know this, for the bitter knowledge has

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been forced upon me, that there are few men who could be utter proof against such a face as yours—against such a woman as *you* are, if you will that they shall care for you, and throw your dangerous influence over them. I do not quite believe that all would be equally weak or equally tempted ; but there could not be one who would not feel your spell, and Lord Ennisford is weak—that is to say, he is not immaculate.”

“You flatter me,” Lady Aylmer says, with a good deal of mock modesty, lowering her milk-white lids, and a little complacent flush tinging her cheeks with pink.

Lady Ennisford scarcely heeds her, however, as she goes on,

“I did not realise it at first, but now I know that my husband has especial temptations which a man less good looking would never know. Everyone runs after him.

Before I knew this I was too exacting, I am afraid. I fancied I could fill his need of companionship as he filled mine. I know better now!" she adds, with a dreary voice, "and I do not care to chain him to my side. I would rather go into society with him, and share in all that gives him pleasure—but——"

She thinks of the miserable failure of the ball at Annerdale House, and two big tears well up in her brown eyes, as her enemy measures her from head to foot.

"I think now, that that can never be, for I fear I am not made for society. It is not easy to go against nature and the training of a life. I cannot care for crowds. I live in a few—supremely I can live but in *one*. Will not this make you good to me? Leave me *him*. You know what I mean? I don't ask you to shun his presence; but all I ask

is his allegiance to me as a husband. And, Lady Aylmer, *you know it is this that you have assailed !* ”

But she says it so gently, her manner is so far removed from wrath or indignation, her eyes are so imploring, that the other woman, usually full of effrontery, is dumb. She is good for a regular hubbub—a war of words. She has both ability and wit ; but such a strange contest as this is far beyond her prowess, so she bites her red nether lip, and clenches her roses tighter.

“ You see, you assailed it from the beginning ! You intoxicated him, you made him feel you cared for him, and was it in any man to be indifferent to such flattery when it was backed by such a face as yours ? Why did you do this, Lady Aylmer ? ” and, in spite of her, a little imperiousness crops up in her voice, as she sees again, in letters

of fire, words that have branded themselves on her brain, these fatal words that Bella had showed her.

"I did it because I cared for him!" is the defiant, insolent answer, for the other's imperiousness rails her, and beside she is rapidly plucking up spirit as she feels her vantage ground, and knows that, no matter what happens, she will queen it over this poor little foolish loving woman, with her dowdy dress and simple ways.

"Care for him! What *right* have you to care for him? Would you like me to try and take your husband from you?"

"Yes, and be thankful too!" Lady Aylmer flashes, angrily; then she suddenly tones down, though she thinks it high time to turn the tables, a task it is easy for her to accomplish. "You must not be too hard on me; it would be unjust," she says, quite

beseëchingly. "I really had an idea at first that Lord Ennisford was a bachelor. You were never with him, and he did not act like a married man, you see. And, dear me! how you have lectured me for my poor little innocent peccadilloes of thinking him tolerably good looking and agreeable! If you bring such a battery to bear upon him no wonder he would like to run away from you!"

"Yes; it's no wonder," Lady Ennisford says, a little dreamily, gazing at the perfect face and form before her, and thinking what self delusion has brought her here, for, with those sapphire eyes firing his brain, and this soft-lipped woman lavishing the incense of her flattery upon him, *she knows* that it is a lost game, that the reins of his heart have slipped from her puny hand into Lady Almer's all-powerful grasp.



“Now, Lady Ennisford, you must listen to me in my turn, and let me tell you a few wholesome truths. Don’t make me wholly responsible for your husband’s flirting propensities; it will be unjust. If I had never been born, it is impossible that you could have held in absolute loyalty a man like Lord Ennisford. You are too *true*.” If you want to keep a man’s love, never by any chance tell him the truth. He will not bear it, no man bears the truth, if it is unpleasant, and the naked truth, as people call it, is almost always *hideous*. A man may put up with the truth from another man, but never from a woman, that is not if he loves her, or desires to stand well in her opinion; the moment she dares to become his judge, his critic, she creates in him coldness, if not indifference to herself; the key to the entire arch of a man’s love is

flattery ; soothe his self love and you will always be charming to him. Hint that he has a fault, and he will run away from you, if it's only to his cigar ! Now I am quite sure, Lady Ennisford, that you have never been angry with your husband, without showing it, even if you did not speak a word ! ”

No answer, but in the pure limpid eyes—sorrowful, regretful eyes—she reads that it is a true bill.

“ It would not have gone so hard with you, if you had but known how to manage him, but I see you lack *finesse* ! ”

And as Lady Ennisford listens ; she feels the indignant blood surging up to her face at the impertinent personalities she has subjected herself to. Why did she come ? she wonders. She might have known it was almost impossible to look at the face, exquisite as it was, and not to know that the

soul was hard in defiance, insolent in evil, and wanting in womanhood.

“You are too devoted to him ! You don’t give him a scrap of stimulus in loving you. There is nothing that a man hates as *toujours sucré*, you made him sure from the beginning that your devotion was absolute, and as endless—pardon me—as it is narrow ! That no matter what he does, or what he doesn’t, no *iota* can be taken from it, that to you he is the only man in existence, to dote upon, to live in, to pronounce upon, and to *bore*. Lord Ennisford, to my poor judgment, is the very last person for this, such overweaning loves wearies him and worries him. It wants *spice*, and if you insist on feeding him with this tame, commonplace food, of course he will break away into bye paths where he may taste the stolen sweetness of forbidden fruit !”

Lady Ennisford hears a new philosophy to her in all this, but though it does not go to her heart one whit, it bewilders her brain, so she merely replies with infinite pathos,

“Ah! it is very easy for you to say all this. You, who have so much! I have but him, I want but him! Oh, please don’t steal him away from me, Lady Aylmer! Just think, the world full of men may be your kingdom, but under any conditions I could have but my husband—he is my all; and in your heart you must know what it would be to have *all* taken from you! Say! I pray of you, that you *won’t* take him from me!” And in the excitement of the moment, she lays a hand on the woman’s arm. “You will never, never realise the good you do. Look at these children. Can any passing pleasure recompense you for the shame

that they would suffer later on when they understood what their father had done? Oh, Lady Aylmer! the proof of existing things has been forced on me, or I would not speak so freely. To take a man from his wife, to break up a home, these are not light sins; and what could give you atonement for the remorse which must come to you sooner or later?"

"The love of his eyes, the worship of his life," is the quick answer; "but you are the most dreadfully in earnest of anyone I ever met. It tires me to death, and you must forgive me, when I say, that it must tire your husband to death, this eternal thrusting of the right and wrong of everything. Do you never take anything for granted? do you accept nothing because *it is*, and is therefore to be enjoyed and rejoiced in, without question?"

“Never anything that would infringe the peace and happiness of another woman.”

“Well, we two shall never come nearer one another if we talk on for ever,” Lady Aylmer says, flippantly, waxing impatient, for the little French clock, surmounted by Venus and Cupid, strikes seven, and she remembers that she has to make a *ravis-sante* toilette, for the theatre to which Lord Ennisford will attend her. “We do not stand on the same plane, or see anything from the same angle of vision ; what is symmetrical to one is distorted to the other. I don’t believe I could *ever* like you ! for you do so disturb my good opinion of myself, and that is not pleasant. But I respect you, for your goodness and your devotion as a wife, a thing which, in these days, one sees only in a blue moon, you know. But though I should be sorry to hurry you

away, I confess it makes me very uncomfortable to have you dropping your divining rod into me like this. I prefer to hold it in my own hands and to sound other people's depths; so, as I cannot do much for you, for you alone possess the power of making Lord Ennisford a good boy again, loving and loyal and very penitent, I think it would be best, perhaps, if we did not discuss the subject any more."

And in this way she words her dismissal.

Just for one second Lady Ennisford looks straight into her eyes, then she turns away her keen regard, for she knows she has failed, miserably, ignobly failed; that her self-humiliation has gone for naught, and her whole honest, loving heart has been laid bare, only to

be laughed at and mercilessly trampled on; so, without another word, she puts down her veil and moves towards the door.

Lady Aylmer suddenly catches up the little girl in her arms and smothers her with kisses, but baby May, in happy ignorance of the dignity required in the Lady May Graham, pummels the pink and white cheeks with her dimpled knuckles until she is let go.

“What a darling, what a cherub!” cries Lady Aylmer, with a bold, loud laugh; “you are the miniature of your father, little one, and as beautiful as an angel!”

Upon this Lady Ennisford puts out a trembling hand, and almost wrenches her child out of the other’s grasp, with a curious expression of fear and even horror



on her face, then she goes quickly out of the bijou house that seems to suffocate her, with the light, mocking laughter smiting her like a blow.



## CHAPTER IV.

### FAUSTINE.

"Princes, and ye whom pleasure quickeneth,  
Heed well this rhyme before your pleasure tire,  
For life is sweet—but after life is death,  
This is the end of every man's desire."

**B**ELLA had called Lady Aylmer an *intriguante* with a pretty face, and, though Bella's words have mostly more gall and wormwood than milk and honey flavouring them, her verdict in this instance proves her to be well versed in human nature, or rather in the worst part of nature, for Lady Aylmer is certainly as full of intrigues and ruses as any *grisette*. They have a spice of secrecy and scheming about them, and provide an excitement to women like her that their souls delight in. They

don't want heart work, these little intrigues, but they want brain work; and so she has not quite planned out her next move for drawing this bone of contention, this fair-haired, blue-eyed, weak and fickle aristocrat more into her power, while she sits with dreamy abstracted eyes, apparently absorbed in *La Belle Hélène*.

And Lord Ennisford, watching her, lashes himself into a fury of jealousy, believing that some other man monopolises her thoughts.

"I shall call to-morrow at four," he says, in a surly voice, as he puts her into her brougham with prim, plain Miss Payne alongside her, on duty, and his brows knit close as she responds with a languid "Yes."

None of us in this world happily are wholly bad, so that this woman, with all

her faults and follies, and even sins, proves no exception to the rule. To say that her conscience pricks her after Lady Ennisford's visit, would be far-fetched, for she has scarcely a "conscience;" but yet something, an intangible, indefinable something in the appeal of the gentle voice, something in the wistful glance of the poor, moist brown eyes haunt her, though they do not for a moment cause her to waver in her resolve to pursue a passion which will work such evil in its gratification:

As she plots and ponders, she lies back lazily in her corner of the carriage, the dusk hiding her face, and as virtually alone as if she were the solitary occupant, for Miss Payne is well up in her *devoir*, and is one of those delightfully discreet persons who seem to have the power of abstracting at

pleasure all sight from their eyes and all sound from their ears.

"I want nobody's husband!—no judge, no master. That brute, Aylmer, has given me a sickener of that sort of thing! I only want Ennisford's thoughts and admiration and liking! Could I be his wife and have all these good things! Not for long I'll wager!" Lady Aylmer thinks; "Ennisford is one of those men who can't stand harness of any sort, put a bit in his mouth and he kicks at once. *She* has spoiled her own life simply by being too good, too true, to him; passion and poetry and glamour only flourish in an atmosphere of falsehood, anything realistic kills them at once! Elizabeth, put down the window on your side, for heaven's sake, it is absolutely grilling in here!"

These last words are spoken loud, in a

childish, querulous voice; and Miss Payne meekly drops the window, and drags her cloud twice round her throat to keep off an east wind which betokens bronchitis and quinsy, and half-a-dozen other ailments to which all flesh is heir, especially hers.

"I had a letter from Lord Herbert Graham to-day," she says, quietly, and she smiles under cover of the gloom as she feels her companion give quite a start, it is a little revenge at any rate for the order to open the window.

"A letter from Bertie! Why, what can he have to write about?"

"You."

"What does he say?"

No answer.

Lady Aylmer waits a moment, then she repeats, impatiently,

"What does he say?"

"The letter is marked 'private.' "

"Then why did you tell me you had one?"

"The contents are private, not the fact of its being written."

"Dear me! a distinction without a difference. Well! you old maids have a curious habit of showing yourselves disagreeable and obstinate. Come, Elizabeth, what does Bertie say?"

"He does not say much, he only asks questions."

"What about?"

"You and Lord Ennisford!"

"I don't want to know *what* he asks!" flashes the beautiful virago, "but unless you swear to me, and I shall have means of finding out if you break your oath, that you will not enlighten Master Bertie in any one subject, I shall send you adrift

before you can spell your own name!  
Will you swear?"

Miss Payne hates Stanhope Street. She hates the whole thing, the false, wicked life, the subterfuges, the lies, the hideous atmosphere, and above all she holds in utter detestation and disrespect, the woman to whom she is indebted for her *pain quotidien*.  
*But*——

What an awful word "but" is—how many wrong steps in life hinge on it, how many heart burnings are borne for the sake of it.

Miss Payne knows that if she is sent adrift before she can spell her own name, she will find herself the occupant of a sky-high garret, and an old crippled mother will be minus support.

"I'll swear!" she says, meekly; "but if I may give advice, do not let Lord



Ennisford come too often to Stanhope Street, it will cause a scandal."

"Scandal! What do I care about scandal? I am above the rubbish people talk—*honi soit qui mal y pense*," is the answer in a tone of virtuous indignation.

"I did not allude to *that* sort of scandal!"

"What sort, then?"

"Oh, nothing—simply that it would cause a scandal if Lord Herbert Graham blew out his brains!"

"Blew out his brains! Bless the boy, is *that* what he says? Why he *has* nothing particular in the way of brains to blow out!" Lady Aylmer cries, with a mocking laugh; but somehow she feels "creepy," as if something uncanny was by.

"Such brains as he *has*, then," Miss Payne observes, grimly.

"And you really believe, at your age,

Elizabeth—and you are quite forty, you know, though you have the date of your birth put down ten years too forward in your Bible—that men are fools enough to shoot themselves for women now-a-days? Why men *have* no hearts!

“*You don’t hurt their hearts!*”

Lady Aylmer stares at her inquiringly through the darkness. “What *do* you mean?” she asks.

“You only hurt their *senses*,” Miss Payne answers, with a little contempt on her mouth; “and senses preponderate over heart and brain in both Lord Herbert Graham and his brother.”

“Does Bertie hint that he will blow out his brains if I find out that Ennisford is nicer?”

“He does not *hint*, but *he will*.”

“Idiot!” Lady Aylmer pronounces, and

Miss Payne neither knows nor very much cares whether it is Bertie or herself who comes under this flattering epithet as she dismounts from the brougham and thankfully seeks the freedom of her own bedroom, after long hours of doing sham respectability, and sitting like a lay figure, blind and deaf and dumb, while her blood boils to seething point at things that are carried on under her very nose.

Lady Aylmer is thinking of Lord Ennisford, indeed he fills all the undercurrents of her thoughts, while her eyes listlessly run over the pages of *Balzac*.

"Who, on looking back on the happiest portion of his life, can single from it one perfectly happy day?" she reads, and, "Surely not I," she muses. "Something I have missed, or it has missed me! Of all that I can call mine, what makes me so

happy as the glance of his eyes, the tones of his voice, the touch of his hand. Yet *she* asked me to give him up! Give him up! I cannot. I would rather rivet the chain closer. I'll go to Paris to-morrow. It will make him more anxious, more *empressé*. He is growing too much at ease, too reliant on his own power, and I shall know by his face, when he hears I am going, how much he cares! But how miserable I shall be away!"

She says all this to herself, believing that she is in love. It never strikes her that this is about the twentieth attack of the same virulent ailment she has! an ailment which, while it lasts, brings a delirium of pleasure and an oblivion of any mischief she has wrought in arriving at it.

Five minutes after, the door opens, and, *sans cérémonie* as usual, a tall figure strides

into the luxurious little drawing-room and halts *vis-à-vis* to her.

Then he sees some drops glittering on the long curled lashes of the loveliest eyes in the world.

"Tears! Why, what's the matter!" and Lord Ennisford forgetting his incipient jealousy and chagrin of the preceding night, only recollects that even in weeping, this woman looks beautiful and bewitching, for her weeping, like every other action, is studied.

Drops, like glistening dew, flow slowly down her cheeks, and the origin is so artificial, so little genuine emotion brings them that they leave the skin in their course as smooth and pink as before their advent, while the exquisite little Grecian nose retains its alabaster whiteness.

Even in his distress at seeing *her* dis-

tress he remembers how fearfully red Lady Ennisford's little nose grows with crying, and the memory, trivial and absurd as it may seem, draws him an inch or two closer to this Syren, who seems above the common infirmities of her sex.

Silly man! but men in these days are proverbially silly about women, so that if one wise one crops up, he makes a fuss in the world, to which possibly his merits don't entitle him.

"What is the matter?" Lady Aylmer murmurs, in a choking, gasping voice, behind her handkerchief, bordered with rich *valenciennes*. "Only a trifle, *you* would think. I leave town to-morrow!"

The richly-laced handkerchief swerves a little to the right, as she watches his face, and she is satisfied.

His is a nature *exigeant*, demanding, that cannot understand denial, much less bear it. His fair skin waxes many shades whiter, and his forget-me-not eyes glow with a deeper blue.

"Leave town, Edith? You *mustn't*."

"But I *must*."

"*Must*? Why, I was ass enough to think your *must* was only when *I* willed!" he says, in an arrogant tone.

"This won't do! he is going too much ahead," she thinks.

"I *must* go. I have promised!"

Of course he loses his self-control at once. *Promised*—and the promise can only be to a *man*!

He catches her hands and pulls her off her sofa, making her stand face to face with him.

"*Promised*, did you? And *who* dares to

make you promise?" he glares angrily, growing white to the very lips.

"I cannot tell you!"

"You cannot tell me!" he says, in an odd, low, concentrated, disjointed sort of voice. "By God, Edith, you have to learn one thing yet! I never allow anyone to trifle with me, neither man or woman. Leave town to-morrow; keep your promise to whomsoever it may be; I care not! But from that hour you and I are strangers! I swear it!" and he almost flings her back on her seat.

Whether it is that she realises by his face the full extent of his liking, or whether she finds him still more adorable in wrath than in peace, or whether she fancies it will be a very bad move after all to go away and leave him to the temptations of town; this is a point it would be difficult to solve, for



she is an enigma, a paradox, a contradiction; and her motives, after all, are not worth diving for, but she blurts out abruptly something, which, to a certain extent, is not true.

“I promised *your wife*!”

“*My wife?*”

“Your wife!”

Just for a second he believes she is amusing herself at his expense, and he grows angry; but, looking straight at her, a conviction suddenly dawns upon him, that there may be some truth in her words.

“I did not know you were even acquainted with Lady Ennisford,” he says, lightly, crushing down his surprise and annoyance; for, though he has no principle to speak of, he has yet, to an inordinate extent, grand ideas of what is due to his wife, simply because she is Marchioness of

Ennisford. No matter how much misery and humiliation he entails upon her himself, he hates the notion that her simple unworldly ways have perhaps made her a butt for Lady Aylmer's wit or malice ; and, above all, though Stanhope Street holds for him a sort of paradisaical glamour, it's the last atmosphere he considers as fit breathing for his wife.

"Yes!" Lady Aylmer replies, glibly ; "she has called upon me, you know. It wasn't a very amusing visit. She did not say much, but what she did say was to the point—awfully to the point. She left me in no doubt as to her opinion of me and of my influence over you ! but it never seemed to enter her head about your influence over *me* ! The sum of my offending is in 'taking' you, as she calls it, away from her ; but you know I don't believe that any

one can be taken from another—that which we lose, we lose through some lack in ourselves. But you see I cannot, however unwittingly, be the cause of anguish to anyone, can I? especially when she did look so interesting and pathetic, with a child hanging on to each hand! So I as much as promised her that I would go away. Tell me, Ennisford, are you sorry a little that I am going?" and she puts a hand on his, and draws him down on a delightfully soft seat on the sofa, as she pleadingly asks this question.

He is silent, for this sudden blow has struck below the source of his surface feelings. She is not disappointed, for, though he sits like a statue of Apollo—dumb, unresponsive—she knows that the idea of losing her affects him quite as deeply as she desires.

But anger and intense mortification mingle in his cup of regret, anger at his wife's "sneaky" conduct. He actually feels quite murderous as he thinks of it, and the ridicule to which her folly has probably subjected her and him through her. But even now he cannot forget all that is due to that wife. He will not speak one word to her disparagement, but neither can he attempt to hide the pain he really feels at parting with this woman, whom he has grown to love with the wild, impetuous, selfish, fitful, contemptible love, of which he is alone capable. "Love," he calls it, but it is only a phantom—a deadly, ghostly passion that makes his flesh and blood creep, and crucifies his heart by its very intangibility and emptiness. He has been sitting by her, his face hidden by his hands, and, as at last he turns to say some

word of regret, it is arrested midway between mind and heart unuttered. Surely the grief expressed in the lovely little bowed head, the half-veiled eyes, the quivering tears, the trembling red mouth, so tender, so childlike, is not feigned.

They may call Lady Aylmer a *coquette* and a flirt, a heartless woman, but they do her dire injustice.

He sees it all now—*knows* that for him—all for him—is this wondrous loveliness of grief!

He had turned to give a faint utterance of his regret, and her look, her attitude, make his heart stand still with a sudden rapture. She, whom young England delight to follow, is *desolée* at leaving him!

An impulse, as fast and fierce as a sirocco, rushes through his veins. This is not strange, for he has many impulses—and

a great many bad ones. But this one appears to him the very greatest and most irresistible that the devil has ever sent him.

It is a wild impulse to snatch this beautiful adorable creature to his heart, and holding her thus to swear that the world and its riches and glory are just nothing—nothing to their love, for she loves him with all her soul ; loves him as he loves her, with a frenzy of passion that is beautiful as a soap bubble, and bursts as soon.

Good heavens ! Life has never brought him a triumph like this moment ; and it is stamped on the face of the woman by his side, in the love she bears him !

But still he does not even now entirely forget everything else, or really believe that “all for love the world well lost.” Memory puts an icy hand upon the reins of passion. Could he have forgotten, as many

a man has forgotten, in one overmastering moment, all—all but what this moment holds of love for him before his eyes, what madness he might have committed.

“Edith, it was not very strange for Lady Ennisford to wish you to go away, you see. I do not blame her. You, who know better than she can what cause she has to desire your absence, can quite understand her anxiety on the subject, but it can do her no good *now*, so *stay*.”

“Yes; but my promise,” and Lady Aylmer’s voice has lost its decision.

“Never mind your promise; it will do her no good; her very asking it has brought evil fruit already. Had she not been so rash in pressing the matter, I might not have learnt *yet* that life—my life—is nothing without you. It is the idea of your leaving town that has made me fully

realise what your absence would reduce me to. Your going away will make it even harder for her, and for me, for I know I could not bear the sight of her, or of anybody who divided us two. *Stay.*"

She falls to dreaming a little over the tone in which he says this last word. Flirt though she is, this man has certainly bewitched her, for he is one of those rare men that awaken love in woman without any effort of their own.

"You shall *not* go, Edith," he cries, and imperious and masterful as his voice is, it only startles her into a practical realisation of her erstwhile dream.

Her arm, lovely and firm and white as one of Canova's carvings, glides round his neck her eyes, rich in warm purple depths and



lustrous as southern stars, look up at him with a marvellous softness. Her beauty, enhanced by the snowy purity of her dress, seems toned down suddenly by passion's magic touch into simple girlish loveliness. The Goddess of Love herself could not look more tempting, more irresistible than this frail woman, as scruples and reserve flung to the four winds of heaven, the passion of a "Faustine" overruling all, she only remembers that her lover is near, and he?—well, he is only a weak, fickle man, neither better or worse than the young aristocrats of England.

Venus lives once more in this nineteenth century, and she lives—*for him*.

"Swear you won't go, Edith."

"I swear," she says, lifting up two perfect lips to seal her pledge.

After one long glance into the lovely eyes, one fervent clasp of the jewelled hands, Lord Ennisford stands once 'more in the street. The evening has closed in, but the gas lamps flash into his face as he walks along. What a face it is!—handsome as it must always be, but now at its worst, with a hard, sullen look in the blue eyes, and a hard set line round the facile mouth.

*He is going home.*

Novel readers, as a rule, dislike digressions, but they must pardon me for just saying that the *fac simile* of Lord Ennisford's countenance at this moment can be seen on three parts of married men's faces now-a-days; and that as it is impossible that three parts of the wives can be to blame, the evil originates in the nature of the man, nourished and ripened

by those women of whom it is aptly written :

“And the best and the worst of this is,  
That neither is most to blame ;  
If you've forgotten my kisses,  
And I've forgotten your name.”

Lord Ennisford is going home. Home is where the heart is, and surely his heart is not just now in Charles Street. He feels, in fact, that in the present state of his mind that he cannot go there, so he thrusts a cigar into his mouth, turns his face towards the Embankment, and there strides up and down with the chill starlight above, and one or two energetic policemen eyeing him suspiciously. But what does he care for their looks, so long as they leave him alone to pursue his monotonous constitutional on the smooth level road for hours.

Time counts for nothing, neither does fatigue, when the heart throbs in tumult and brain and pulse follow suit.

Meanwhile the same night drags on at tortoise pace to Lady Ennisford. Her husband's absence from dinner without a word of excuse, though it calls forth a few venomous inuendos from Bella, is yet not such a very uncommon event. But when at last the lingering rosy glow of sunset slowly fades into the cold grey dusk, when tea is over and Bella gone off to her "workshop" to finish the multitudinous tasks that should make her a model woman instead of a snake in the grass, the little loving, jealous woman begins to picture a room in Stanhope Street, which has stamped itself indelibly on her mind. Gay and glittering and luxurious, with tender colour pervading all, a woman of marvellous beauty and vivid tints, soft hands, flashing with jewels, and clasping roses; two sapphire eyes, perfect in colour, perfect

in shape, but hideous in insolence and mockery; two perfect lips, disfigured by the ringing, heartless laugh; a form like a young Athene, or like that picture of Judith in the Paris Louvre, replete with exquisite curves and bends, but defiant and bold.

At last she shuts down her lids hard, hard, to try and close from her vision the sights and sounds that drive her mad. Taking up a book, she sits down by a shaded lamp, resolved to give her full attention to its pages.

She is not a woman to find pleasure or amusement in the thrilling scenes of some modern sensational romance—for the training of a life is not easily cast aside, and the Duchess of Sandowne tabooed light literature among her offspring. Lady Ennisford's mind is not deep or much cultivated, but

it is naturally pure and simple, and loves food of its own kind. Presently, in turning over the leaves, she runs across the story of Orestes, which she had begun some weeks before. She tries to read; tries hard to trace through the web of that tremendous plot, the working out, the unity of the moral law, Zeus' lesson to mortals, "Learning through Sorrow." But the weary spirit refuses to follow it—*Clytæmnestra* : *Iphigenia*—what were the crimes of the avenging queen or the sacrificial death of the murdered virgin, to this poor heart of a modern day, bleeding over its own wound!

She shakes her head doubtfully over Agamemnon's words:

"To be of humble mind is God's best gift!"

"I have never found it so!" she murmurs, with a weary voice. "Are these a sad prophecy of truth?"

“But be the issue as it may,  
Eternal fate will hold its sway:  
Nor lips that pray, nor eyes that weep,  
Nor cups that rich libations keep,  
Soothes these dark powers relentless ire,  
Whose altars never flame with hallowed fire!”

Suddenly she hears her boy start in his sleep in the adjoining room, which a curtain divides from her bed chamber, and dropping her volume hastily, she is down on her knees beside the sofa. He has not been himself in these last hot summer days; and once more her terrible anxiety for him has arisen to add to her other troubles.

But after a low moan or two Chester sinks into a quiet slumber, and creeping on to the sofa, she puts her arms round him, and as the dawn breaks, drops into a deep but uneasy sleep.

It is quite day now, and still she has not awakened, and the full garish light falls on

her face, as Lord Ennisford stands and looks at her.

His very attitude suggests aggressiveness, tall, bolt upright, his arms folded across his chest ; his head uplifted with a sort of haughtiness, which is habitual to him, especially when out of temper.

She is his wife ! Not the exquisite glowing creature by whose side he has lingered half the night ; whose great almond-shaped, milk-white lidded eyes looked into his ; whose white alabaster arms stole round him ; whose face and voice and touch lulled him into a veritable dream of Paradise !

Those eyes and arms and face and touch and voice are contradictions like their owner, for they are the sweetest subtlest taste of forbidden fruit, even while they are a hashish that makes him oblivious of everything.



*She* is his wife ! this wan and weary woman, in her *chiffoné peignoir*, her hair rough and uncared for, the cruel revealing light bringing out in keen distinctness each line that pain and worry have left in many a trace on her face.

Poor thing ! what chance has she now ?

Before the sensuous, pleasure-loving man, the faded woman is simply a blot no human nature ! So it has been from the beginning, so it will be to the very end.

A want of good looks is a misfortune on which he looks with supreme disgust. Yet, who could have made this man—who stands now aggressive, defiant, disgusted, believe in the days when he wooed and won this simple daughter of the Clavering's, that just a little time further on, he would stand and gaze upon her as he stands and gazes ! with a cutting, cruel, heartless criticism, seeing

with an artistic vision every defect—the most trivial of flaws—seeing with eyes that are unsoftened by one lingering thrill or throb of tenderness !

He is tired of her—horribly tired of her ; a state to which so many men arrive, who make these fashionable marriages. It may be that our gilded well-born youth are reared in so artificial an atmosphere, that genuine or steadfast feeling is a sentiment that never takes root in them. And what stern injustice of fate it is, that *she*, this worn out, washed out, bleached and ironed out looking woman, should love him so utterly still ! and that if she had been beautiful, and flirty, and bad even—ten chances to one, she would have yet held the strings of his weak, faithless heart !

He is sick of her—sick of her little loving simple ways, of her tender, truthful, plain

face. Half conscious of this for some time past, he has never quite owned it even to himself before now ; the conviction transfixes him in this moment, without inward apology or reservation. He accepts the fact with his forget-me-not eyes neither drooping in self reproach or shame at his utter want of loyalty, and honour, and right, but resting on her with an intense aversion, which, poor soul, in her slumbers, she may well thank God she does not see or realise. It is not enough that she cannot fill his life or delight his eyes, and feed his senses, without her presuming to try and send away one who can do all these good things—all.

This is the real head and foot of Lady Ennisford's affront. This is what has suddenly turned indifference into positive dislike. His mind and his eyes are so full of that other woman, that nothing could

be said or done now by the pale wan wife which would touch a sleeping chord in his nature, reaching back to that supreme moment of some five years back, when, under the Clavering oaks, he swore he loved her. Nothing! If such a word or deed exists, Lady Ennisford knows it not, With the most sensitive sense of fitness in all her dealings with others, with the purest holiest, best feelings of womanhood implanted in her breast, she lacks finesse, and finesse, as Lady Aylmer had said, is the only thing that can manage a man of the world, or rather a man about town. She half awakens—the burden of miserable jealous thoughts, the weight of many tears on her lids still, and is only just conscious that a tall figure looms before her, and that a faint slow air fans her hot temples, for Lord Ennisford, on his

entrance into the room, had throw open a window.

"Is that you, George?" she murmurs, dreamily.

"It's me!" he answers curtly enough.

"You came home very late! Where were you?"

"Busy! What the devil is my dressing-room converted into a nursery for? A fellow can't have a place to call his own in this house!" he says, savagely.

The tone rouses her at once; so she sits up, with her arms still round her boy, and looks up at her irate husband pitifully.

"Chester was so feverish last night that I could not bear to have him upstairs. Look at him! Doesn't he seem very ill to you," she asks with quivering lips.

Lord Ennisford does not glance at him.

"Ill! no      Why are you for ever in a

fidget about that child? He will never be right till you learn to leave him alone. He has got a cold, I suppose, but children are always taking cold and getting over it, if they are not fussed over!"

Having delivered himself of this sympathetic speech he walks up to his dressing-table, looks at himself in the glass steadily for a minute or two, with a complacent expression on his features, then sitting down, pulls off a boot and sends it flying to the other end of the room, pursued in the next instant by its fellow.

The thud caused by them on the floor awakens the boy suddenly, and seems likely to cause one of those domestic storms that Lord Ennisford abominates, but Lady Ennisford hushes him quickly into another snatch of sleep, which is all the rest he knows of late.

"I expected you home to dinner last evening, George; I made sure of it somehow. Why didn't you come?" she asks, with a troubled look, after a little.

"I told you I was busy; besides Bella said you were going to the opera."

"Bella!—opera!" and her usually mild voice positively quivers with resentment, "Bella will never tell the truth about *me*." And *you* know I am not in spirits to go to operas!"

"More's the pity!" he sneers, thinking that he has never seen Frances look so ugly as she does at this moment, huddled up in her crumpled muslin, with the light pouring down straight on her face. This consciousness fills him completely as he gazes again coolly and deliberately on her, still holding his cigar smouldering between his teeth, and simple as she is, she almost

reads his thoughts, and actually cowers under his glance.

"How coldly and critically you look at me," she cries, passing her hand rapidly over her head as if to smooth down the rough tangled hair. "And yet I have done nothing but think of you." And she bursts into a positive hurricane of tears. Her nerves are so unstrung by one thing and another, that she knows she *must* cry, no matter if by doing so the heavens fall.

"Scene!" he answers with a hateful, provocative laugh. "Well, I am getting used to it, like the eels—cry away!"

She dashes at her eyes, and looks at him startled, thunder-struck, then she moans aloud.

"Oh God, why do I live! George, I know you spent your evening with *her*. I am sure of it! It was all the same to



you if Chester was ill, and I miserable, so long as you were with that woman! Why do I live!"

"I am sure I don't know!—to worry my life out I suppose!" he says, in a cruel savage tone, that awes her and seems to petrify all the expression on her face; not a single pulse in his heart pleads for her. She does not look pretty. There are great purple rings round her eyes, her nose is red. She troubles him. She is in his way.

Now human experience holds no second blow so smiting as the first really cruel words uttered by the one loved best. Lord Ennisford has spoken to his wife thoughtlessly, unkindly, contemptuously even at times, but never with such cruel and wanton heartlessness as just now. No one on earth could have made her believe him guilty of such thought and speech. No one could

have convinced her of it but himself, and he has done it now. He has done it simply because she has dared to interfere with his pleasure.

He is not a man to forgive anyone for doing this, much less his wife, whom he has lately looked on as his inferior, mentally and personally. His words are scarcely as cruel and crushing as his looks and manner, and as she gazes and listens (it seems to her with a sort of suspended consciousness), she sees his eyes faded in colour and fierce in light, a pitiless feline light that reminds her of Bella, she sees a cruelty on the thin-lipped sneering mouth that also reminds her of Bella, and seeing all this she almost fancies it is not Ennisford, but a hideous delusion of her own overwrought brain.

If she were an ordinary woman, a woman with a coarser, harder mind, stung by

contempt and indifference, she would probably retort.

If she were what is termed high-strung in temper but feeble in conscience, she would probably resolve to pay him back in his own coin.

But she uses no bitter words, and makes no resolves. She is cognizant of no feeling, save a mute appeal against the cruel fate that has strnck to every tissue and fibre of her being.

She still sits as if stunned on the couch, the light still revealing the flaws in her face, the *flaws* which are the real offenders in his beauty-worshipping eyes ; at last she draws a hand slowly across her brow.

"This is not like you, Ennisford," she says, very softly ; "if—if it is, I *know* you will be sorry some day."

"Please don't come the pathetic dodge

over me!" he replies, roughly; "that is all played out, nor the lofty moral dodge either. I am just as good and righteous as you are, though you have made it your duty, ever since we married, to assume a superiority of sanctity. It comforts you, no doubt, for you can't help knowing that you are *not* my superior in many other things," he goes on, his rage culminating as he goes, "and I shall *never* be sorry, *never*, that I told you the truth!—that you heard it at least *once* in your life!"

The woman that listens to all this is the daughter of a duke, and in her twenty-three years she has never come into contact with that awful thing called "snobbism."

Yet, though she would not breathe the thought to save her life, she has a full vivid consciousness staring her in the face, that this husband of hers, in spite of his mar-

quisate, his noble quarterings and patrician face, is a cad at heart. The consciousness quite petrifies her, ossifies her, as she sits staring at him with dull almost leaden eyes, out of which colour and expression have faded, leaving just a dead blank.

At this moment a tap comes to the door, and Bella, dressed in her rigid *sœur de charité* fashion, appears, looking from husband to wife as she enters.

As she looks, she grows sure that that for which she has so long worked and watched has come to pass, namely, a thorough disunion between them, but except by an uncanny twinkle in her pale eyes, she does not in any way betray her knowledge of this acceptable fact, and going up to the sofa, quietly takes the boy in her arms.

"If you care to save his life, you had better take him to Highcliffe," she

says, in a short decisive tone to her cousin.

“I have no objection, *pas le moins du monde!* I cannot leave town just now, but the sooner you both go off with him the better to my thinking.”

To say that Bella is taken aback would be to use a very mild term. She is thoroughly annoyed and enraged; the same blood flows in her veins that flows in his. She has, very much more than he has, felt revengeful currents in it—more, simply because in her they have never ceased to beat against the barriers of what she calls her wretched fate. Rarely has the bad blood in him turned against her. Whatever he has felt he has kept it under, and to Bella, of whom he has been a little frightened, he has uniformly been “nice.”

Even Lady Ennisford, with her simplicity,

her sweetness and gentleness of nature, has never interfered with this.

But now, a mightier power, Bella knows, has arisen, and towards this new loadstar the tide of the man's impressionable nature has set.

Bella recognises it by sheer instinct. He is further from her now than he has ever been before, further from her power over him.

Their eyes meet in one long concentrated glance, and the expression of both is curiously alike. Bella has triumphed surely, as far as Lady Ennisford is concerned.

But, after all, what have five years of struggle and deceit and mischief been worth! She is no step nearer to him now, the recreant lover of her womanhood. True to the fiat of her fate, she is still alone, and in this instant seeing the

man who has ruined her life for her, as he really is, seeing that she has missed him finally and altogether, in this long, concentrated glance she feels that she—*hates* him!

“I said that she and I would soon drift away in the same boat!” she hisses into his ear as she says good-bye, and to this Lord Ennisford answers nothing.

Perhaps there is a small spark of compunction, however, as he bends down for his wife’s offered kiss; but it is too faint to rise above the ascendant and overwhelming sensation that now—*now!*—for a time, at any rate, he is free—free to go where he will, linger where he will, as he did in the blessed halcyon time of bachelorism. No Bella with her cat’s eyes to dog his movements, no wife to nag at him with either looks or tears or



words. "Liberty, thou art sweet!" he murmurs in a melodramatic fashion, as, dressed up "within an inch of his life," he descends the steps at Charles Street.

The pleasant, amber sunshine glints down on one of Lincoln and Bennett's choicest hats, and a subtle fragrance crosses his aristocratic nostrils from the spray of stephanotis that nestles in his button-hole.


Young, handsome as a god, tolerably rich, and on his way to the Park to meet Lady Aylmer. What more can he want? Nothing.

The skies above him are not so serene and blue as his eyes as he forgets that he even has a—wife!

## CHAPTER V.

### LOVE IMMORTAL.

" A mother's love !  
If there be one thing pure,  
Where all beside is sullied,  
That can endure  
When all else pass away ;  
If there be ought  
Surpassing human deed, or word, or thought,  
It is a mother's love ! "

S the train speeds her on to Highcliffe, Lady Ennisford feels glad, although she knows that each moment divides her further from her husband.

The surface life of London oppresses her—she has never loved it. She has never believed in it, but now it seems to wear a threatening aspect to her from which she shudders away in fear and pain. Highcliffe is nicer—ever so much

nicer, she says to herself as she sits with her children on the shining sands of a little sea place that lies half a league from the Towers. A poor, little, straggling place that has never known the horrors of excursionists or been trodden by the dainty feet of fashionable belles or "mashers." But its very ignorance of such things makes its greatest charm.

It is the first morning of July, and nothing can surpass the splendour of sky and water.

The lovely, purple waves sparkle with a glad swish up in the yellow sunshine, and everything is replete with peace and pleasure.

Near is a shrimper, whistling a monotonous air; further on, a tiny boat, and it seems to merge into the water around,

both are so weirdly still! Eager little ripples run up now and then to kiss its immobile bow, sliding swiftly and softly back into silence. In the distance hovers a yacht, its white wings spread out pure against the faint azure of the sky, and with a gaudy Union Jack drooping in the laggard air. Right away, a low line of hills are outlined athwart the horizon, while above them piles of cumulus cloud lift their fleecy pinnacles into upper deeps and rifts of blue. These little hills wear veils of *nebulæ* shot with opaline tints, while here and there a single purple wave reaching upwards bears, trembling, for an instant upon its creamy crest the same iridescent hue.

The water, in one long, loitering wave, breaks upon the little beach, then as slowly swashes back into its bed, leaving

the reach of green and golden-brown seaweed, of pearly pebbles and pinky shells, all glowing and weltering and waiting for its next caress.

A white sea-gull circles just above the whistling shrimper ; a handsome kingfisher perched on a wedge of baby rock peers with wide-open eyes and quivering plumage into the water beneath, full of eager and ecstatic life as he darts for his prey. A filmy dragon-fly whizzes past, and a swarm of midgets dance on the light waves that come murmuring in with quite a little stir of happiness, and the glittering foam that breaks upon the ledges seems like the overbearing effervescing freshness of the delicious day.

Near a fisherman's hut that lies basking in the sun, some doves move in their cotes, and one comes down and perching on a low

rail, blinks its shy eyes and puffs out its lustrous breast.

The atmosphere is delicious. Dame Nature seems to have mounted at once to her zenith and made life and love and beauty perfect in the prodigal *largesse* of this July day, and Lady Ennisford sighs as she feels, that she alone gives out a desonant note amid the consummate peace and harmony around.

“Mamma, det me one of dem.”

May wants a sea-anemone.

Five years before, in her honeymoon, Lady Ennisford was child enough to sit where she sits now, watching the same translucent creatures with delight.

There they are, gleaming and trembling in the purple water, the loveliest and the most perishable of things.

"I want un in my hand," says Lady May, in her small imperious fashion.

A four-year-old autocrat, with a quaint hauteur in the way she holds her little head, an absurd copy of her father, and with that father's selfishness and wilfulness patent already, in her words and ways.

"If Mamma puts one in May's hand, it wont be pretty any more," Lady Ennisford says. "Wouldn't May rather see it in the bright water, so pretty, than have it in her hand?"

"No! May rather have un in her hand," the child reiterates, pertinaciously.

"So did Mamma once!" replies Lady Ennisford, and she looks rather sadly at the little one, as she lifts up in miniature her father's beautiful, demanding face.

"Put not your trust in the love of man,"

a voice seems to whisper near, but in spite of it she feels happy.

For let no woman who has children say that she cannot live without man's love. She who has projected and perpetuated her life in the being of another can never be alone, As she clasps the hand of each child, it appears to Lady Ennisford that she has taken another and a deeper hold of life, and she knows fully now that a woman may love her husband dearly, but that love for her children is immortal.

Whilst she is bending over and vainly trying to capture the object of May's ambition in her parasol, Dr. Blendon comes tramping down to the beach, for Lady Ennisford has sent him word of her arrival on the preceding evening, and he has hastened to see her and the children.

"Welcome back!" he says, in his rough



bluff fashion, but with a ring of real emotion in his voice as he takes her hand, and in the same breath arrests an instinctive shake of his head lest she should see it, as his quick eye falls on the boy, who sits on a big stone with a book on his knee.

"I can read beautiful," says little Lord Chester, in a triumphant voice.

"The devil you can! I am very sorry to hear it! You are not to read any more, I can tell you, sir. You are to stay out doors all the time in the sunshine. I thought you mamma was too wise to shut you up to read, when she ought to have had you out, making a man of you!"

"She didn't shut me up," he answers, loyally, looking at his mother with a depth of devotion that seems strange in so young a child. "I wanted to learn to read my

own self, so she bought me this nice book.  
See ! ”

“Dr. Foster went to Glo’ster,  
In a shower of rain,  
He slipped in a puddle,  
Up to the middle,  
And never went there again.”

“Is you Doctor Foster ? ”

The elders laugh, and he goes on.

“Mamma took me and May to a very big garden in London. It was full of trees ever so high, trees like those in May’s Noah’s ark, and I saw two rabbits. My Mamma is going to buy me two rabbits, they are going to live in the greenhouse, and Walters is making me a snare to catch a water-rat ! ”

“You’ll do for the present ! ” say the old Doctor, pleased at any outburst of the primal boy in the fragile child.

“I couldn’t help it, Doctor,” Lady Ennisford whispers, deprecatingly, “I remember

what you said about teaching him, but as I couldn't keep him from learning I thought I had better assist him. Chester, darling, go with May and see if Walters has your snare done."

Implicitly obedient, Chester takes his sister's hand with old-fashioned politeness, and when the two are out of hearing, the poor mother says with the big tears in her eyes and her lips quivering,

"I think I know! Doctor, how delicate he is, I feel sure he will die a child—he will never grow up!"

"Nonsense! you kept him too long in London, my lady. How can any child live in an atmosphere of fog and smoke and filth. You have come back here none too soon for your own health, either, I should say," and he gives her a searching glance.

How aged she is in so short a time and how all the bloom and brightness of youth seems to have left her.

“I think worse than ever of that little village of ours. You have the half dead look everybody has that comes out of it after one of its wearing, tearing seasons. I am afraid you have been too gay—been to too many balls—dancing, and overtaxing your strength!”

She shakes her head. “I never dance and I have been only to one ball,” she says, wistfully,

“Really!” and he puts his fingers on her wrist, “weak and fluttering, very! but the pulse will be good enough soon, if I am listened to properly. Mind, your Ladyship, plenty of air and sunshine, brown bread and cream, fresh and ripe fruit, and I should like rumpsteak nearly raw—quite

raw, if possible, scraped to a pulp for the boy, and ditto for yourself. You both need it to cure you of London, and make you plump as partridges. As for Lady May, I believe she would thrive on a door nail, she has such a splendid physique, like her father, and when does *he* come?"

"I don't know! Lord Ennisford has so many engagements, you see, Doctor; the London Season has not ended yet!" is the quiet answer, but he sees a sudden flush crop up in the thin white cheeks, and he guesses.

"All the better," he cries, cheerily, "we shall have more time to recruit, and be better worth his inspection!" and laughing the old man departs, but his back has not fairly turned before a grave look comes over his face, and he strides on, sticking his stout cane into the ground with a

*vim* that is to him an excellent escape valve for overcharged feelings.

"There's no help for it," he mutters, irascibly. "No help whatever! I see the end already. Ennisford never had any steadiness in him, and no moral courage. I saw that when he let that dark-browed mischievous old sweet-heart of his, Bella Grant, take up her diggings alongside of him and his wife, *sine die*. She's the bottom of all the mischief to Lady Ennisford. Good-looking, clever! So is the devil clever. If he was a decent sort of husband it would be far more to the purpose, just now! Poor thing! *poor* thing! she tries hard to deceive herself, but she isn't deceived, I can see that in her eyes! That boy has got to go, I am afraid, in spite of the rumpsteak. A clear case of atrophica, and London has finished

off what nature began. Too much nerve, too much brain for the body, that's all. He may live a year, or he may die in a month. But she is right, he will not live to grow up—of course not!"

But it is scarcely gloomy, after all—the boy's slow fading away. Through it his mother grows familiarized with death in its gentlest guise. She learns to feel that life holds nothing so sweet as rest. Chester is all a boy in his delight in snares, in his desire for a gun, in his longing for a bear—a good little bear, who will play with him and live with his rabbits, in his anxiety to train and to beat a drum in martial array while his little sister marches solemnly behind him as a "private," and in his capacity to dig trenches and build mud forts, under the generalship of Walters—his own man—a long, melancholy-faced

individual, whose sole happiness consists in ministering to the comfort and amusement of his little lordship.

But every boyish delight is overtaken by the inevitable weakness. However brightly the day begins, with boyish shouts and laughter in the sunny air, it ends by his mother's side, in the incessant cough, in the cruel slow fever.

The special nature of his disease is the impossibility of tracing it to any known cause, its subtle and evasive symptoms, its extreme difficulty of cure.

There are days when it seems as if he can never be so ill again—so resolute and so enthusiastic he appears in his little outdoor sports. Yet another morning finds him lower than before, followed by days and nights of the same alternate brightness and languor, and through every fluctuation



Lady Ennisford sees the final end—sees it even while she lets herself be deluded now and then by hope.

With her poor heart reft with anguish at the very thought of his dying; she still thinks she would rather he should go, before he forsakes her love for the evil world. Her way will be very long and very lonely without him, so long and so lonely that she starts away from the anguished thought; but anyhow, it will be much to know that her boy, her darling is safe, safe from sorrow, safe from sin, safe for ever.

Living in and for her child, hour by hour, she thinks less of herself and his father. Still when she hears Chester's merry laugh on the lawn, or watches him while he sleeps, the form of Lord Ennisford comes to her.

Sometimes he stands before her contemptuous and cruel, as he stood that last

morning. Sometimes he comes to her in her dreams, the godlike lover of her childhood.

She knows he would not believe her if she wrote him the real condition of the boy, "worrying him" when he was so pressed with Town engagements. So she says very little, and at last allusion to Chester is made by Lord Ennisford himself.

"Though you do not say so, I am sure you are still fidgety about Chester. Frances, will you never cease courting trouble? The sooner you realize and act accordingly, that he must fight his way like all boys do through the whole army of childish ailments, the better it will be for him, for you, and certainly for *me*! A hospital is the last place a fellow cares to put his foot into!"

The rabbits still live in the greenhouse,

but Baby May feeds them alone, and calls upon the name of her brother in tones of shrill childish sorrow. Since her first step she has been his inseparable companion, and now she seems lost and most unhappy without her life-long playmate.

And there is a new shrine at Highcliffe.

In a quiet little room that lies at the far end of one of the many galleries, with its windows looking on to a green sequestered portion of the grounds, Lady Ennisford has gathered everything that belongs to her boy. *Belongs!* She never puts the word in the past tense to herself, for, to her Chester lives both night and day; she never forgets him—never! No matter what bright hour life may bring, her heart can never be *filled* by it, for most of that heart lies in her darling's grave.

In this shrine of hers, of which she locks

the door and kneels for hours together, a pale slight figure with streaming eyes and clasping hands, is a trainer's hat with its bright cockade, a silent drum, a little box of tools, a pile of toy books, and the boy's first boots. His mother with her own hands has folded and laid in the drawer of his little bureau every garment left of all he has worn, from the dainty white baby frock to the last new sailor's suit, with its broad collar and bright buttons, that he lived to wear but once.

Ah, God! who shall presume to measure the extent of this kneeling woman's grief. It is with no morbid emotion that she shuts herself up in this room by the hour communing with her child and her own soul; a part of herself has passed into the impalpable, but no less it seems a part of her conscious existence, for she can *never* be

sundered from it. Her boy can never be less her boy—less loving, less beloved. All others may outlive him, forget him, but not his mother; the mother's heart will never cease to miss him, no matter what comes; and she has loved this child even more as if to make amends to him for what he never had—his father's pride or sympathy.

When Lord Ennisford stands and looks down upon the dead boy, a keen pang of remorse shoots through the natural sorrow that he feels, a thousand sweet pleading looks and shy entreating words, but dimly noted and wholly unheeded, when they spoke to him from the eyes and lips of the living boy, now that the boy is dead rise up to haunt him. True, he has never been proud of his heir, for Chester, though all a boy in his habits and predilections, had, nevertheless, his mother's organisation.

“A temperament well enough for a girl,” his father would say, “but May is my boy! *She* ought to have been the boy!”

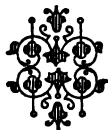
A reproduction of his mother in physique and sensitiveness, as that mother grew to be more and more distasteful, the boy became scarcely less so.

So, unconsciously almost, she was always trying to make up to him for the withheld love and sympathy, and thus in a double sense she yielded up her life of life with him in death. Cold and white, as if cut out of marble, she hearkened to condolences on her loss, but if anyone had listened at the keyhole of that little room, they would have heard more than one sob, deep and low, breaking from that mother's heart.

“And yet, and yet, my darling, I would not bring you back, even if I could. You

are safe now ! safe from this weary, wicked world."


This was the piteous refrain of her thoughts, and then she would fall to wondering, poor soul, if it was *really* sinful of her to wish to die too !



## CHAPTER VI.

### A DAUGHTER OF HETH.

"A lady clothed like Summer with sweet hours,  
Her beauty fervent as a fiery moon,  
Made my blood burn and swoon.

"NNISFORD will be furious if you wear that heavy crape on this evidently gala occasion," Bella remarks, with a sneer, as she sits *tête-à-tête* with Lady Ennisford after breakfast, with the contents of the letter-bag scattered before them.

Lady Ennisford glances down on her black dress and sighs and grows a shade paler. It is only three months after all since Chester died, and she is told that even this semblance of mourning for the boy would meet with disapproval in the eyes of her husband.



"I can't help it, Bella," she says, quite decisively, "if I must see all these people I shall certainly not alter my dress for them!"

Bella shrugs her shoulders.

"Who are these people?" she asks.

"Read for yourself," and Lady Ennisford pushes the missive carelessly across and then forgets all about it till Bella's voice arouses her out of her sorrowful reverie.

"Ah! you see I am right; he alludes to your attire even in this note: 'Put on your prettiest dress, fill the house with flowers and have rooms ready for half-a-dozen people whom I have invited to Highcliffe for a day or two; we shall catch the 2.40 train to-morrow.'"

"Cool!" goes on Bella, hotly, "he might surely give a little breathing time before

he billets a troop of men—smelling of tobacco and horseflesh, probably—on the house; I suppose they are men?”

“I suppose so,” Lady Ennisford responds quietly; then she rings the bell for the housekeeper, gives all the necessary orders, and leaving Bella to fume and fret over the unwelcome innovation, slips out into the Italian garden that lies at the side of the Towers.

The day is one of those specially golden days that come just now and then to us like a hasty snatch of Paradise.

A perfect sunshine, an ambient air.

It is in truth a day of days—one on which to feel ineffably content to enjoy to the fullest that which is happily expressed as the *dolce far niente* of life.

There is just a gentle rustling among the tall elm tops, a wave to and fro of the

silver beeches, and not a sound save the faint and uninterrupted murmur of the greedy brown bees settling down on the perfumed blossoms.

The morning bears on it an unwonted crimson, the flowers blush more brightly, and the grey blue clouds stand quite motionless, like so many pillars of heaven.

It is just such an hour when bliss seems perforce to descend from the great sapphire dome above, like an angel of peace, so that the restless and yearning hearts of mortals may be satisfied.

But Lady Ennisford has no spirit to be happy, or energy to enjoy all the good things of this life.

A heavy shade passes over her face as she fills a basket she carries, full of white scented flowers; and when the task is accomplished, she walks slowly down a

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long avenue with arching trees that meet overhead, at the end of which, in a lonely sequestered nook, a tablet stands gleaming in the sunshine, at the foot of which all the rarest blossoms are laid day by day.

She puts them there herself too—for to her it would be pain inexpressible if aught in the shape of illness prevented this dear labour of love.

This one little spot in Highcliffe holds her heartstrings, and she knows that if anything drove her from the place, if she could not go down each morning of her life, and sit by her darling's grave, that life would not only be miserable, but unendurable. As she goes now, softly, noiselessly, reverently, with hushed breath even, over the long stretch of velvet turf, May catches her up and nestles her small hand into her mother's.

It is quite curious to see how the little laughing Hebe face grows sobered, and how slowly and gently the tiny usually flying feet have learned to do this daily task.

Then both of them—mother and child—stoop and scatter the offerings they have brought, till George, Lord Chester, sleeps beneath a pure white covering of sweetest bloom.

“May say her prayer, Mamma?”

Lady Ennisford bends her head; she is not brave enough yet to trust her voice *here*.

And so May drops down on her chubby knees beside her brother's grave and says a prayer made by herself.

“God make May dood, so that poor May will see Chester up dere!”

“Amen!” breaks from the mother's heart

in a sob, and then with a long, long, yearning look—she turns away.

She has scarcely seen her husband for a month and his letter brings a feeling of intense disturbance to her quiet life. But she is a woman whom fashionable ladies laugh at as *bizarre* and prim, for she holds duty to be above inclination, and though she hates the whole thing, she resolves to do her duty now, and to make the house bright and pleasant for his guests.

They are men, of course—she is thankful for that, even though they reek of tobacco and horseflesh according to Bella's unpleasant suggestion; but she knows she can slip away when her hospitable cares are done, and, after all the ordeal is only for a day or two.

Long mourning and a good deal of solitude have brought a certain nervousness in

their train, but she coaxes Bella to crawl out of her shell, and give the protection of her gaunt figure and grim face, and Bella, who is like most women—at heart a rake—after a little show of reluctance, consents.

There can hardly be a prettier place than Highcliffe presents to greet Lord Ennisford and his guests as they drive up through the south lodge gates.

The sun, grown low to westward, sends long lance-like rays quivering across trees and shrubs and flowers, forming aureoles of glory for the heads of the big patriarchal oaks, that clump together like so many giant sentinels of the place, and make a glittering nimbus about the queer mediæval windows of the tower, set amid emerald foliage and clustering blossoms.

The house, always proud and palatial, but sometimes a little severe and chilling

in the peculiar architecture, on this day looks quite beaming, as if in welcome to its master.

A sound of horses' feet, a crunch of gravel by carriage wheels, loud men's voices, and then—laughter.

A laugh, light, sweet, sparkling as champagne, comes through the open doors and windows like a peal of silver bells, and reaches the ears of the women in the drawing-room.

Bella starts up from her seat, the red blood rushing in torrents over her face and neck, her pale eyes literally blazing.

"Who is that?" she exclaims.

"*I know*," Lady Ennisford answers, in a low tone, and she clings to a chair, for she feels her limbs trembling violently, her senses going.

Ah! the shame of it!—the *insult* of it!



The light sparkling laugh smites her to the heart and brings from it a throb of the old anguish which she had known so bitterly six months ago.

How dare he bring her here? How *dare* she come?

These thoughts flash like lighting through her brain, but there is no time, no alternative.

In another moment, cold and white as an image of stone, she goes forward and welcomes Lord Ennisford's friends with grave eyes and mouth, but courteous manner and voice, while May dances into her father's arms and kisses him rapturously.

The visitors consist of three men and two women.

*Place aux dames.*

Lady Aylmer, dressed in the colour of an autumn leaf, in its richest and most varied

tints, a mellow brown that the pale gleam of a wintry sun flecks into gold here and there, and her sheep dog Miss Payne, who invariably sports a rational garment, and wears her mouse-hued hair cut short; Squashington, a "bloated aristocrat," who has a little tale attached to him. Overrating his attractions with a celebrated *Frou Frou*, he was beguiled, once upon a time, into a handsome and irrevocable settlement, but no sooner was the deed sealed, signed and delivered, than another Lothario, a Lothario of commoner pedigree, but with a handsomer face, carried off the fickle dame across the mill pond, leaving the noble marquis *planté*.

Sir Seymour Fane, a Guy Livingstone type, handsome, flirty, lavish, irresistible, and a charming contrast to Squashington, by whose side he stands, and Macduff, heir

to an Earldom, popular with everybody, pleasant to the eyes.

“*Dear* Lady Ennisford, I am so glad to see you again !” Lady Aylmer murmurs, in her softest, most *séduisante* voice, then she drops it to the proper sympathetic key, “and *such* sad things have happened to you since we met !”

Lady Ennisford bows a little frigidly as she quietly evades the daintily-gloved hand by holding out her own to Miss Payne, who, surprised at the condescension, clasps the slim fingers in a vice.

Then the hostess, with whose demeanour not a soul can find fault, passes on to the other guests, with a little smile and word, and Lord Ennisford, champing the ends of his blonde moustache, registers an inward vow to punish the quiet intimation his wife has given of her distaste to his company,

by devoting himself more to Lady Aylmer than he had first intended.

“Wont you come and look at our best view?” he asks softly, and of course she assents at once, delighted to triumph over the dowdy little woman who has dared to snub her. So in a few moments more, when cups of tea and coffee and plates of cake have been demolished, and the sun has gone down fairly to rest on his royal couch of purple and gold, leaving rather a cold grey sky, two figures loom up against the horizon, at some little distance from the house.

But not so far as to make it invisible that they are more engrossed in each other than in Highcliffe’s “best view.” Lady Ennisford notices them from her window, but moves away quickly, without an uttered wail, for she is growing accustomed to this

sort of thing perhaps, or more likely the fiery ordeal of grief she has just passed through makes all else seem trivial and puny.

Miss Payne, kneeling on the floor of the apartments assigned to them, meekly unpacks milady's boxes and arranges her *chic* toilette for dinner. The men folk smoke and stroll through the exquisite grounds, and Bella, in her rigid black dress, paces her own room like an infuriated panther, as she, too, marks, through the grey, evening haze, the two forms—both tall, both worth looking at—his in an irreproachable suit, hers in autumn tints of golden brown—sauntering slowly side by side.

“I can't, I *won't* bear it,” she cries in a shrill voice at last, as she glares at them like a maniac, and with her sharp feline eyes detects a smile on the man's mouth,

a smile that she knows he wears when he is thoroughly *épris*. "I'll kill him sooner than that horrid woman shall take him !"

Foolish words apparently, just the ebullition of a scorned woman's fury—yet——

The lights are not lit, for the glorious day yet holds its own, in spite of the slumbering sun ; a faint streak of crimson and amber rises on the western sky, and before it has faded away, a young moon, a half crescent hangs out in the heavens, and stars upon stars peep and wink and twinkle down ; the air is balmy, the flowers sweet, and it is an hour to dinner, so the visitors elect to linger on in the grounds for awhile.

Bella walks up and down still, clasping and unclasping her great bony hands as she always does while she "brews." She

is brewing now, a most fiendish thing, but there is a loose hinge somewhere, for she knits her brow and screws up her thin lips and then bites her nether lip till the blood starts.

Suddenly she halts in her constitutional and opening her door a couple of inches, —listens.

“Pierre; do not forget to take Lord Ennisford’s coffee into his dressing-room,” Lady Ennisford orders.

She is very angry—very hurt at her husband’s utter disregard of her feelings and of the proprieties, but that is no reason that a little matter of his comfort or habit, that of taking *café noire*, while he dresses for dinner, should be neglected.

“Ah!” cries Bella, half audibly, with a sort of relief, “it looks as if it was

divine justice and retribution! That coffee is just what I wanted!"

Presently she hears Lady Ennisford's light step passing up the stairs to the nursery, and then she peeps once more and sees Pierre the valet with a silver salver, enter his master's dressing-room.

But no sooner has his figure disappeared downstairs, than Bella creeps stealthily across the dark passage and into the room—creeps just like a cat creeps just before it springs on its prey.

Her face is the colour of a sheet, but her eyes burn like a couple of unholy fires.

All is still, not a human soul is looking—to the Divine Eye she does not give a thought. She glances keenly first to the right, then to the left as she advances



towards a small tripod that stands near the window ; then she takes a small folded paper out of her pocket, looks at it with a fiendish smile, drops its contents into the coffee, and stirs it with a steady hand.

It is not a love philtre, this !—judging by the look of diabolical malice which she flings at the old lover through the window.

A quarter of an hour afterwards, Lord Ennisford runs up the stairs, two at a time, whistling softly, and May, who has scarcely left him since he arrived, and who has been watching for him in the passage, smuggles herself also into the dressing-room.

She perches herself on the top of a portmanteau, her little fat legs swinging. But he is so engrossed in his new passion

that he scarcely notices her presence ; and irate at his want of attention the little thing grows indignant and hurt.

“May go away!” she says, after a moment or two, with a piteous quiver on her rosebud mouth ; “naughty papa, not to talk to her,” and she struggles on to the floor.

His impressionable feelings are awakened at once. This mite is so thoroughly his own child in both face and character that he worships her almost as much as he worships himself.

Throwing down his brushes, he takes her on his knee and kisses her fondly.

“Bon-bon,” whispers the greedy little mouth right in his ear, and smiling, he searches in every nook and corner of the drawers, but no vestige of any saccharine morsel shows itself, so he looks round

perplexed in hopes of discovering something "nice."

A lump of sugar gleams up on the round table hard by, and with her still in his arms, he fetches it.

The little one, who has commenced very early to hanker after the fleshpots, looks eagerly at the cup.

"Papa! May thirsty."

"Thirsty?"

There's nothing but the coffee, so he puts her down, and brings it.

"Papa is not thirsty, luckily for you, Miss Greediness! Now then, you musn't have it all, because it is not good for you! only one, two, three drops."

And he holds the spoon to her lips.

And there is no instinct, no prescience, to bid him dash away the fatal draught. With a laughing face, he watches the

baby eyes sparkling with pleasure at this new treat; the little lovely chubby face glowing with animation and gluttony, and the head, with its golden fluff, bending eagerly to the longed-for sip.

"Only three drops, mind!" he reiterates.

But May is not an ordinary child; she has a wilful, passionate spirit, just like his own. She jerks herself away, and turns up her tiny nose.

"May *shan't* drink it!" she says, obstinately, with an imperious toss of her tangled curls. "Bad papa to try and give May nasty, beastly physic!" And then, disappointed of her treat, she sets up quite a little howl. With any other child he would be angry and impatient, but this one he gathers up and soothes and wipes away the tears of passion as gently as any woman might do, and by

the time he has succeeded in restoring a smile to her face, the gong sounds for dinner, and he runs down the stairs with May still in his arms.

And the cup of coffee so carefully stirred by Bella remains on the table, black and untasted.

Lady Aylmer has elected to be transcendent this evening. So she comes down a symphony in *eau de nil*, with the weird fire of many opals burning at her fair throat, and she has lilies of the valley—emblems of purity—clustering in her bosom. She looks like Venus, or Calypso, with her filmy robes billowing round her, and forms a startling contrast to the Suzeraine of Highcliffe, as for one accidental moment they stand side by side.

Lady Ennisford wears black, dull heavy black, high up to her chin, and falling in

mournful folds to the floor, weighed down by yard deep crape, and unrelieved by a single gleam of white. No jewels glisten on her throat or arms, only her broad gold wedding ring shines on her third finger, a mocking symbol of everlasting love.

It seems to stare back at her in scorn, as her eyes fall by chance on it.

Lady Aylmer's radiant face, with its rich sapphire eyes, its soft pink bloom, its scarlet mouth and pearly skin, set in a frame of golden hair, suggests a rare tropical flower. Lady Ennisford's features appear as if hewn in stone, so cold, so still, so calm. There is not a shade of anger in her large limpid brown eyes, or sign of a sneer upon her lips. She looks just frozen, and as her husband's eye falls on both women critically, he shrugs his broad shoulders, and an ominous frown

puckers his brow as he takes his seat at the head of his board.

Still, with all these internal jars, dinner, that curious autocrat, proceeds from soup to pine, without a ruffle on its current ; everything is first rate, for Highcliffe always does everything *en grand*, and all the arrangements are perfect, thanks to the housekeeper and the *chef*, for Lady Ennisford has no more notion of ordering a dinner than emulating the traditional cow in her flight over the moon ; and Lord Ennisford is too constitutionally indolent, too epicurean in his dislike of trouble, to bother himself with domestic details.

On the long table stand rare white and gold vases, holding exquisite orchids, and silver baskets heaped with pines and peaches, and luscious amber and purple grapes. The feast is excellent, too, the meats have lost

their identity in the elaboration of their flavouring; cunning *entrémets* are ingeniously introduced to give fresh zest to appetites already satiated, wines of rarest bouquets abound, and, above all, one fair woman's face, fair as a star, leavens the repast.

There is only one speck that seems out of place amidst the talk and the laughter, the shimmer of silver and glitter of crystal, and this is Lady Ennisford's grave face and mourning garb.

Bella has not put in an appearance, and no one misses her.

Certainly the gorgeous salon at Highcliffe has never thrilled with such melody as when Lady Aylmer sings "Il Segretto" in her superb contralto a little later on. Even Lady Ennisford with all her horror of the women, listens perforce, but suddenly looking up she catches sight of her husband's



face, and that's enough. Devils shrieking in her ears, would be a more welcome sound to them.

As the beguiling voice floats past him and appeals to his senses, Lord Ennisford just gives himself up to the spell, and makes no concealment of his intense admiration of both singer and song, and when the last notes, brilliantly given, of "Il Segretto," die away, Lady Aylmer sinks languidly into a big velvet *bergère*, while her innamorato leans at the window by her side, making the two of them a pretty Faust and Marguerite tableau enough, ensconced in half shadow, with the soft night full of glittering stars and silent flowers for a back ground, and filmy lace curtains partially screening them from the vulgar gaze, so that Lady Ennisford's jealous glances are scarcely to be marvelled at.

She keeps her seat bravely on her sofa, however, and replies in a vague stupid way to Seymour Fane's soft nothings, the same as he is in the habit of addressing to every woman, be she fair or plain. But she is so dumbfounded, scandalised, at this flagrant display before her very nose, that she scarcely knows what she is doing. In a bewildered maze she stares at them, as, deliberately crossing the long drawing-room, they go through a French casement on to the moonlit lawn. In a bewildered maze she sees him tenderly wrap the young Athene form in a white fleecy cloud, that in the misty light looks classical enough to suit it. And still more in a maze, she marks Lady Aylmer take his arm and stroll quietly towards the shrubberies.

Then she turns a livid face, and talks animatedly to Seymour Fane, and Macduff,

on the last town gossip, the pictures, the opera, the professional beauties, while her soul is reft in twain, and her brain whirls round.

By-and-by, just as the clock chimes the quarter to mid-night, Lord Ennisford and his companion saunter slowly in, and the two women and four men fall into a sort of circle.

Lady Ennisford's tongue has lost its cunning and she sits, not pale but grey to her lips, with a broad dark shadow underlining her eyes.

"I am afraid we are keeping you up," Sir Seymour says to her, in his soft pleasant way that makes half the women he speaks to fall in love with him on the spot. "It is time for all good people to be in bed."

"Yes," she answers quietly, rising and standing erect in the midst of the group.

For the first time in her life she looks positively imperial; her head is thrown back, her slight figure is drawn up to its every inch, and her mouth quivers with unmitigated scorn.

"I am tired, and hope you will excuse me. Good-night, Sir Seymour: good-night, Lord Squashington; good-night, Mr. Macduff," and without a glance at Lady Aylmer she sweeps toward the door.

But Lord Ennisford loses his temper and his discretion, as he starts to his feet, white with rage.

"Frances, you have in your fatigue forgotten to say good-night to Lady Aylmer!" he exclaims, trying to control the trembling of his voice.

Lady Ennisford pauses, and faces the whole of the company with calm, placid features.

"I see no lady here!" she says, in a clear, distinct tone. "If there had been one, no fatigue would have made me fail in courtesy to her."

And she is gone.

The whole thing falls like a bomb shell, and in the bewilderment of it Lady Aylmer rushes away, tears of anger and mortification in her eyes to confide her grievance to Miss Payne's sleepy ears.

"Plucky thing that of Lady Ennisford," Fane says to Macduff, when Lord Ennisford has mysteriously disappeared. "You wouldn't have thought her capable, would you?"

"I don't know; those little women are the very devil if they are really roused, you see. By Jove! it was a crusher for the fair Edith!"

"Serve her right!" growls Squashington.

"I hate those sort of women that are semi-respectable and semi-the-other-thing."

"You ought to hate what's wholly the other thing, old chap, considering *Frou's* game!"

And Squashington vouchsafes no reply.

It is past two o'clock when Lord Ennisford, who has been cooling his heels in the grounds, chucks the remnant of his cigar into a belt of laurustinas, and strides up to his dressing-room.

He has no candle, and as he crosses the room towards the mantel-piece for a match he trips over something and nearly loses his balance.

Angry and sore of spirit, he swears a little and kicks impatiently at that which has impeded his way. Then he strikes a light, and looks down.

Starting back, his face blanched and set,

he sees a man lying in a sort of heap on the floor—his features all distorted with agony, his eyes open and staring, his hands tightly clenched—the sight altogether horrible !

It is Pierre, his French valet, dead, with a cup and saucer shattered in pieces lying beside him !



## CHAPTER VII.

“WHAT DO YOU THINK OF ME?”

“I wonder if we two shall meet  
I wonder if old love still lives,  
If years must pass ere one forgets  
Or life must end ere one forgives!  
If fate will lead our footsteps on  
Until the waiting hours be past  
When truth shall lend her golden light,  
And heart shall beat for heart at last!”

**D**IRECTLY the inquest is over, the fashionable visitors are glad to be off; with that grim object, lying there, that the men portion have been to see, there is something oppressive in the atmosphere of Highcliffe in spite of its beauty of trees and flowers and blossoms.

As for Lady Aylmer, this visit, from which she has anticipated so many frivolous triumphs, has proved such a



*fiasco* that she fairly pants to start while the grey dawn is breaking and the birds are awake and twittering on the eaves, and is only restrained from doing so by Miss Payne's superior common sense and desire for comfort.

The coroner has "sat on the body," and all the tedious formula of such proceedings has been gone through, but no solution of the mystery has been arrived at notwithstanding.

The facts are that Pierre Lafort is stone-dead, that Doctor Blendon swears that he died by poisoning by prussic acid, administered in coffee. But who by?"

To this no one can even suggest an answer even by an inuendo. So far as everyone knows, Pierre Lafort had not an enemy in the household. He has been five years in Lord Ennisford's service, and

has proved himself honest, faithful and temperate in all his habits. He is the last man to whom the idea of "suicide" could attach itself. He was a perfect valet and the meekest and most harmless of foreigners.

And thus the matter rests; and the verdict is given: "Death by poison, administered by some person or persons unknown."

But then he is laid away in a corner of the village churchyard, and after a few days—forgotten.

This same day of the inquest, Lord Ennisford leaves Highcliffe also for London, travelling by a later train than his visitors. But this time it is not to pass pleasant passionate hours in the rose-tinted enervating atmosphere of Stanhope Street. This startling event of the valet's death,

has sobered down sentiment about Lady Aylmer into real pathos about his own child. He remembers with a shudder that his hand offered that fatal draught to May, and good-for-nothing sinner that he is, in the privacy of his own chamber he goes down on his knees and thanks God that his hand was stayed.

Arrived in town, he drives at once to the paternal mansion in Belgrave Square. It is the end of September and London looks empty and slow, altogether dispiriting in fact, but he is too *pré occupé* to notice the lack of movement and fashion or to heed it.

He knows that *he* has been brought face to face with death, and that only by a miracle he has escaped the malice or hatred of a fellow creature, and his tread is far less elastic than usual, as he mounts the stairs to his mother's boudoir, and his face is so un-

usually grave that it rouses her Grace of Bramber, who is inordinately fat and pompous, and plethoric, out of her natural indolence to notice it.

"Good gracious, Ennisford, has anything happened? You quite take my breath away?" she puffs, uncomfortably.

Walking up to the bell, he rings it violently, and when it is answered, orders a tumbler of brandy, half of which he swallows "neat" before he seats himself beside the patent invalid chair, "with mechanical properties for lifting up the head and limbs," in which the Duchess of Bramber passes away most of her torpid existence, indulging her love of laziness, and imagining she is an interesting *malade*.

"A great deal has happened," Lord Ennisford announces, solemnly. "Bella Grant, your niece, has tried to poison me. It is by

the merest chance that I am not a dead man at this moment !”

“Fat” is Her Grace’s prevailing characteristic, facially and physically, fat, that oppresses her, stupefies her, and makes her stare at her son in a scared sort of fashion, while she gasps like a fish :

“Good gracious, Ennisford !”

“It’s true as Gospel writ, mother. I cannot prove it—I don’t *want* to prove it ! but I *know* it ! Pierre, poor fellow, lies dead in my stead !”

“Good gracious, Ennisford !” is all that the obese patrician can murmur again.

“You know I always take *café noir* while I dress for dinner. It’s a habit I picked up at Cairo. Pierre made the coffee always, and as usual brought it up to my dressing-room last night. I did not drink it by some lucky chance, but—*May !*”

He shudders violently, and pauses.

"Good gracious Ennisford! Is the poor, dear little innocent——"

"No, no," he cries, hastily, stopping her before she can utter the dreadful thought. "The child is safe, thank God, or I believe I should shoot myself. But to return to my story about Pierre; finding the coffee untouched, and loving it like all Frenchmen, he drank it off, of course, and is dead from prussic acid!"

"Good gracious, Ennisford!" and in her excitement Her Grace touches at the same moment several mechanical springs in her chair, and in spite of her, her head, her two arms, and one leg rise up *en masse*, making her assume so unducal and comical an aspect, that her son, through all his trouble, is forced to smile.

Presently, with his and her exertion, she

resumes her normal and more placid attitude, and he goes on,

“Now what I have come about is this : you must ask Bella to come back, I cannot keep her another day at Highcliffe, she has played the devil’s own mischief between Frances and myself all through ; but this is a climax : I couldn’t touch a morsel of food in safety.”

“Oh, but I can’t, I can’t have her here,” she says, nervously and very red about the face. “I should die at the very notion of harbouring a suicide,” she adds, growing confused with all this worry.

“Bella is not a suicide ?” he answers, sharply ; “I wish she were, but she is a murderess.”

“A murderess ! Well, I can’t harbour a murderess, Ennisford, I should never

sleep a wink if I did, and sleep is everything to me you know," she says, piteously.

"Then what on earth is to become of her?" he asks, sorely perplexed.

"I am sure I don't know, and it's no use my trying to think, for Sir William says thinking is the very worst thing for me. Ask your father."

"What's the good of that, you know what he'll answer."

"What?"

"My God, sir, do you forget I am a Bramber?" Lord Ennisford says in a slow, pompous voice, inflating his cheeks, and mimicing the Duke to the life.

Upon this Her Grace laughs so heartily that she begins to choke; and once more in this unwonted excitement she touches the wrong button, so that instead of her



head, her left leg assumes a perpendicular position, and it takes some moments before comfort and serenity are restored.

“Yes, mother, there’s no help for it, you *must* have Bella back, if it is only for a week or so. You see if we turn her right out, she wont scruple to bring down a scandal on us; while she is here I can arrange something, a boarding house, a hydropathic place, or even a lunatic asylum for her, only you must keep me quite in the back ground; she hates me already.”

“Why?”

“Jealousy, I suppose: she was head over ears in love with me before I married, and love has turned into gall and wormwood now.”

“Good gracious, Ennisford. Well, it’s no wonder, you see, for you are so handsome that all the women fall in love with you,

of course; just like the men did with me—you are very like me, you know."

But Lord Ennisford does not know, he glances at an opposite mirror that reflects his splendid proportions, and then he looks at the maternal physiognomy, and wonders if his good-looking face will ever turn into a blubber ball, and his fine points run to fat.

It makes him so uncomfortable that for five minutes he forgets more serious things.

"Then it is decided, mater! I'll send Miss Bella back at once, labelled 'dangerous,' and the sooner you get rid of her from here, too, the better. Good-bye!"

He stoops and kisses the puffy cheek and is off again as fast as a hansom can take him to catch a train for Highcliffe.

"Tell Miss Grant I desire to speak with her here," he orders.

*Here* is the library.

It is here that he and Bella have sat side by side in the first days of her arrival. It is here, she has lingered over some last word at night, while his wife watched and waited for him upstairs, with strained ears and jealous heart.

It is here that he has screwed up sufficient moral courage, a quality he lacks, to dismiss the woman from his presence for ever and ever, for he is afraid of her.

He is standing up, strong and stately, erect and haughty as a king when she enters, and he has never looked handsomer in his life, for concentrated feelings lend a deeper blue to his eyes, and give a touch of resolution to the well-cut lips, that with all their perfection are wanting as a rule in *verve*.

And Bella, with her eager materialistic

soul, her greed for all that panders to the senses, recognises the accession of attraction, and her anger and hatred vanish, while her love comes back. The cruel, savage, pitiful love, that would rather kill than lose.

"I have sent for you to say, that in one hour from this time the carriage will be at the door—you will please be ready to go; your traps will be sent after you!" He speaks, imperiously, roughly, as he might speak to a discharged servant, and he rails her.

"Go! go where?" she bursts out vehemently.

"Where? to the devil if you like, it's the place best suited to you. Now, no nonsense and no noise, I am *determined* you shall go!"

She walks across the room, straight up

within a pace or so of him, and stares him full in the face.

"Are you gone clean mad, Ennisford?" she says, in a voice of pretended surprise.

But he knows her and he is past all this now.

"Don't 'Ennisford' me," he cries, wrathfully, "I am not in the habit of being on intimate terms with ——"

"*With——*" she almost whispers; her face is very pale now, and her lips perceptibly tremble.

"A murderess," he hisses loudly into her ear.

She starts away from him with a sharp cry, then pulls herself together in a trice and stands firm and defiant.

"You *can't* prove your words! You *can't* prove them! How dare you insinuate such horrible things!" she asks, insolently.

"I don't want to prove my words, but I *know!* Enough of this. I have arranged with my mother for you to go back to her for a week or so——"

"For a week or so! Then you have told her your suspicions?" she asks, looking at him keenly.

"I have," he answers, steadily returning her gaze, with a cool, hard look.

And she realises at this moment that she and he are parting for ever; that she has with her own hand rolled the stone to the door of her sepulchre!

"And you are fool enough to think that I shall go back to that stuffy old house and let myself suffocate with your father and mother's pomposity and stupidity! No, I am not sunk quite so low, Lord Ennisford, as to eat the bread of a grudging charity for a week or even for a day!

So when I leave this I can take care of myself, without your assistance ; as I have sown so must I reap. But, before I go, I'll tell your wife how I am cast off. I'll tell her everything — everything ! from the beginning to the end of our acquaintance ; yours and mine, my noble Lord ! ”

“ You can do what you like, say what you like ; only in an hour you leave this house—so help me God ! ”

She throws him a look—a revengeful, implacable look—and then, turning on her heel, walks straight up to Lady Ennisford's morning room and, without the ceremony of knocking, pushes open the door.

Lady Ennisford has been sitting for two hours, her hands clasped loosely in her lap, her whole attitude one of utter desolation.

The feelings of shame and humiliation of

the night before are still vivid. Even Pierre's death, though it shocked her, horrified her by its suddenness and the manner of it, has not been able to chase away the thoughts of her own misery, of the wretched loveless future that awaits her.

Is there one thing that she would not sacrifice to her love for this thankless, graceless husband of hers? Yes, just one thing—her honour.

She could have surrendered all—all, she had believed; but, when the time came, she found she could not yield that. She could not have helped saying what she did about Lady Aylmer last night, not if she had lost her life.

"Frances, I am dismissed—ordered off the premises in an hour, for good and all," blurts Bella, in her hard, sullen voice; and



Lady Ennisford, looking up in amazement, sees the cruel look in her eyes—the cruel look on her mouth that she had noticed on Lord Ennisford's that dreadful last morning in town.

“Dismissed; who by, Bella?” she asks, in a feeble tone, feeling too utterly hopeless and languid for discussion with this restless, turbulent spirit.

“By Lord Ennisford, of course! I suppose *she* put him up to it last night, fancying that I was pretty well up in her tricks and ways. He would drown himself to please her, I believe.”

“Bella!—please—hush!”

Whatever she may think herself, she is far too loyal to discuss his shortcomings with an outsider.

“Why else should he send me away?”

“Perhaps you may have displeased

him! it is not always easy to please people, even if we would!" she says, sorrowfully.

"Frances! will *you* ask him to let me stay?"

Lady Ennisford hesitates. She feels sorry for Bella; yet, somehow, her house would feel lighter if she went away.

"You see, I am not likely to see him. He has gone to town."

"He is downstairs!"

"He is *here*," Lord Ennisford says, standing on the threshold. "Now wish Lady Ennisford good-bye, and make haste. The carriage will be here in thirty-five minutes."

"Must she go?" Lady Ennisford says, in a low, constrained tone.

"I have sworn it! and I let no one interfere with my will!" he cries, arrogantly.

His wife's lips form themselves into the word "True," but it dies away unspoken.

This is her husband after all, the man whom she has sworn to love, honour and obey, and no matter what he thinks fit to do, it is not for her to aggravate him into greater bitterness. His sins against loving-kindness and fidelity do not exempt her from her vows.

But Bella, leaning against the wall, looks at him insolently.

"Of course I know why you want me gone!" she flashes. "It is because Frances does not know you as I do! and you think I shall initiate her into a few things, and I *shall*, even *now*, even at this eleventh hour! Don't be fooled, Frances, by him and that dreadful woman, both are as bad as bad can be!"

As she says this in a loud ringing voice,

Lord Ennisford, with a couple of strides, reaches her, and puts his hand on her mouth.

"How *dare* you desecrate Lady Ennisford's presence by such vile untruths," he says in infuriated accents.

Bella pushes his hand away.

"And how dare you desecrate Lady Ennisford's presence as you did last night, as you have done wilfully, deliberately, through the whole of your married life!" she questions, with an evil sneer. "Pray, was it a feeling of honour towards her that made you send for *me*?"

A hot scarlet flush rises on his face, and his eyes absolutely droop a little; and his wife, whose attention is now fairly aroused, and who has been watching both of them, gives a start.

"Ennisford, what does Bella mean by *that*?" she asks, in a tremulous voice, not

daring to analyze the horrible suspicion that once scourged her life, but which had been long laid aside.

“Mean, nothing! She is a mad woman, a dangerous lunatic, and before many days are over her head she will be safe and snug where her words and deeds will hurt no one!”

“So *that's* your game, is it?” Bella asks, coolly.

“If you don't keep quiet——Yes!”

“Coward!” she says, in a deliberate, tone, “since, if I *were* mad it would be your work! Have you forgotten everything? Don't you know the meaning even of regret, compunction, remorse. I'll go, and never darken your doors again; but before I leave it will do me good to disburthen my mind of one or two things! I must tell your wife that I have hated

her, and tried to injure her in every way——"

"But why, Bella—*why* have you done this?" breaks in a sweet, gentle voice.

"Why, because *he* was my love before he was yours—because he was mine—my very own in the sight of Heaven; and you came and took him from me—and so I hated you, hated you as much as I *pity* you now!"

Lord Ennisford, paralysed at this effrontery, is dumb as a sheep, and throwing him a defiant glance she goes on,

"And I have done another thing, something which I don't repent; of which I am glad!—for it will bring that woman to shame. I have sent Lord Ennisford's love-letters to Lady Aylmer to —— Lord Aylmer!"

Losing all self-control at this—realising

the ruin she has brought—Lord Ennisford springs upon her like a wild beast, and presses her face against the wall with almost supernatural strength and fierceness.

At last he releases her, shaking himself from head to foot, and as she reels a little—breathless—ashy white, half fainting, Lady Ennisford feels a certain sensation of pity for her, in spite of all. “Bella, too, has suffered through—*him*!” she thinks.

“Go, Bella! I pray of you, at once; and before you go, if you care to hear it, believe that I forgive you quite, anything, you may have done against me!”

Bella looks at her amazed. This is womanly nature and womanly goodness that she cannot understand, and for the first time in her life, she feels really sorry for the mischief she has wrought.

It seems to her as if a touch of Lady

Ennisford's hand would do her good, but—Lady Ennisford does not offer it, and, with a wistful look at her, Bella turns away and goes slowly out of the room, leaving husband and wife together.

Lady Ennisford sinks back on her sofa and buries her face in the cushions.

"Well!" says Lord Ennisford, "what do you think of me? I was Bella Grant's lover before our marriage, and I am Lady Aylmer's lover now!"

"And my husband! Please God I shall never forget *that*, no matter *what* happens!" says a low loyal voice through a heart-broken sob.






## CHAPTER VIII.

### APRES CELA LA DELUGE.

“Love is a smoke raised with the fumes of sighs—  
Being purged, a fire sparkling in lovers’ eyes;  
Being vexed, a sea nourished with lovers’ tears.  
What is it else?—a madness most discreet,  
A choking gale and a preserving sweet.”

“YLMER is back in England, but  
he has not come *here*.”

These are the words that greet Lord Ennisford three days after Bella’s summary dismissal from Highcliffe, in the Stanhope Street drawing-room.

The news does not startle him as it would have done if he had been unprepared; for he knows quite well that Lord Aylmer’s return is a culminating event.

But things have come to such a pitch between him and Lady Ennisford that anything fresh will be received by him with stoical resignation.

As Bella had said—"As you sow so you must reap."

Pitching his hat and gloves into the midst of all sorts of expensive *bric-à-brac*, he throws himself into a chair.

"*Après?*" he says, watching Lady Aylmer as she moves excitedly about, with a flush on her cheek, and thinking for the first time that there is a certain meretriciousness about the pink and white flesh tints, the densely purple eyes and the vividly scarlet mouth.

So much for the eternity of love that people talk about!

"*Après*. Good heaven's! Ennisford, how coolly you take it!" she exclaims, in a

vexed voice. "*Après cela la deluge*, of course!"

"Of course! a deluge in which both you and I shall be swamped, my dear Edith? But if we would be naughty children and eat the forbidden fruit (it has been very nice, hasn't it? only it has a nasty after-flavour, you know!) we must bear our punishment. That will be—ruin for you; ruin for me, socially. Women will turn up their noses, and steer their garments clear of being defiled; and men will think I have been an ass to give up an excellent wife for—well, time will prove what for! We shall get on together, I daresay, tol-lol, in the land of the orange and myrtle, until—we tire of one another!" and he laughs an unpleasant little laugh.

She stares at him in a bewildered sort of fashion. His manner of taking this business

beats her. Is this the devoted lover of one week back, who hung entranced on her every look and word, and swore that life would be nothing, absolutely *nothing!* without their love.

“Ennisford!”

“Well!”

“Supposing Aylmer has heard anything? knows anything!”

“There is no supposition in the case, Aylmer has heard everything, knows everything! What then?”

“What then?” she says, and her face grows a shade paler, and she looks a little frightened. “He will have a divorce!”

“And how many co-respondents, eh, Edith?” he says, carelessly, giving her a queer look.

And she blushes.

This woman, who has been past blushing

for a long time, blushes now, in the most inopportune moment.

"I see!" he says quietly, but a steely light creeps into his eyes. "I shall have good company!" and from this moment he loses all faith in her.

She throws herself down before him and clasping her two white hands on his knees looks up in his face.

It is not a sudden ebullition of love, or even of passion, it is simply that she knows she is at his mercy now.

"Ennisford," she cries, pathetically, "have you lost your senses! Don't you love me?"

"I don't know!" he answers, curtly, "and I hate tragics! Take away your hands, Edith, they are pretty enough, but I knew by your face a moment ago, that they have been desecrated by

other men's clasps, other men's insolent lips!"

"You are surely gone mad, Ennisford! you *know that* you are in my heart and brain! that you are life of my life, the only man in the world to me!"

"You will swear this?"

"Yes!"

He rises, and going over to the bookshelf, brings back a Bible, a lovely little gem, all velvet and precious stones.

"Here, take this and kiss it."

There is no alternative, so she obeys.

"Now swear that since the fifteenth day of April, when I made your acquaintance, no man has touched your lips."

"I swear!" but she feels a little uncomfortable, for she remembers—Bertie.

He gives a sigh of relief. It is some-  
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thing at any rate to him, that if he follows after, no one has followed *him* yet!

"Come here," and, he points to a seat on the sofa, and, grown suddenly meek, Lady Aylmer drops into the appointed corner thankfully, but her heart is in her mouth. Her future looms uncommonly queer and stormy, and she is dependent on the caprice of a man whose fickle nature is well known in town.

"Do you think we shall pull well together, Edith," he asks, in a cool, matter-of-fact tone, which has a ring of dubiousness in it that startles her.

So she bends forward, until her face rests very close to his breast, and she twines one arm round him.

"Ennisford! look here; it would just kill me to part!" she cries, passionately. "Will you let anything divide us?"

He glances down at the lovely *séduisante* face, 'a perfect face it is, with its little chiselled features, its great rich purple irised eyes, its sweet red lips.

But somehow the face has lost a little of its glamour, and he is sorry for it since they are to pass their lives together, so he lets his arm go round her waist.

"Then you really care for me, Edith? and you won't mind renouncing everything—position, name—all for me?"

"Mind!" she murmurs, in an injured tone, at his even thinking such a thing; but in reality she *does* mind very much, only she knows it is best to make a virtue of necessity; "position and name are charming things, but I would rather have *you*!"

"Ah! I am glad of that. Well, then, we had better make our arrangements at



once, for Aylmer has proofs against us, and will only be too willing to use them. It's a pity that our romance should be reduced to a reality! Reality is so very trying, you know. You will be picking flaws in me before we have been together a month!"

"Never!" she says, fervently. "And Ennisford, supposing Aylmer gets a divorce?"

"Well?"

"Shall I be——"

"Marchioness of Ennisford?—*Never!*"

"But why?" she questions, anxiously.

"Why, simply because I cannot commit bigamy even to please you, *ma belle*; and my wife is fool enough to love me still, and *she* will never hear of a divorce."

"Curse her!" she mutters between her teeth, but his quick ears catch the words.

"*Bless* her!" he says to himself, and he

has never loved Frances so much as he does at this moment, just when he is on the point of putting an eternal barrier between her and himself.

“You must make the best of it, Edith. I can’t give you name or title, but I’ll give you plenty of money and make myself as agreeable as possible. You will probably receive a citation to-morrow. Mine came yesterday. I’m afraid we can’t plead ‘not guilty,’ so to avoid meeting any one we know we will take the express to Dover on Saturday morning, cross over, have a day in Paris and then go on to—say Cairo. Is it agreed?”

“Agreed,” she answers, but her voice is crestfallen, that little remark of his about Lady Ennisford’s obstinacy regarding a divorce, has upset her mental equilibrium and various plans.

"One thing I must beg of you, it is to avoid any clue so as a letter of any kind may reach us. I *hate* letters! They always put one in mind of people one wants to forget. You had better send Miss Payne away to-day, so that she may get no scent of our movements."

"Poor Elizabeth! She is so devoted to me, it will break her heart, I believe!" Lady Aylmer murmurs, sentimentally; but he thinks differently, he has caught a look now and then in Elizabeth Payne's little colourless eyes that have certainly not conveyed to him the expression of devotion.

"This will patch her heart up again," he says, smiling cynically, putting notes for fifty pounds into the slim white hand with pink tipped nails, which hand closes greedily over forty pounds and reserves ten for "poor Elizabeth."

“And now Edith, ta ta, and *au revoir*, I have a lot to do, so don’t expect to see me again till we meet at Charing Cross, on Saturday; mind, half-past eight, sharp.”

With an abstracted look, he takes his hat and gloves and moves towards the door.

“Going, Ennisford, and without one—kiss!”

So he bends and just touches her mouth. How often has that touch sent his heart beating like a sledge hammer, and galloped his pulse—but now! The moment the door is between them, he dashes his hand angrily across his lips.

“I have made a *fiasco* of my life with a vengeance,” he growls, as he strides down the street. “It would be nuts for that devil, Bella, if she could but see into my feelings now. But I really believe Frances would be sorry

at all my fine visions turning into dead sea fruit. Women like her are the only redeemers of the sex, the rest are just animals."

"Has you brought May comfits?"

"Yes, my pet," Lord Ennisford answers, straining the child in his arms and kissing her passionately, and the rosebud lips return his caresses.

Presently the golden fluffy head goes back on his breast, and the facsimile of his own eyes, blue as forget-me-nots, look up in his face.

"Where's comfits?"

"Papa's kisses!"

A quiver of disappointment on her mouth and tears shining on her long lashes.

"All the sex are alike," Lord Ennisford murmurs, bitterly. "She was vexed because she couldn't reach a ducal crown, and even

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this little thing has only cupboard love to give one."

He puts her down, and dives for a small fancy box in his pocket.

"Treams!" shouts May, in delight, "real tocholate treams!" and she pops three or four at once into her mouth, laughing with greedy pleasure in his face.

Her father gazes on her with a shadow on his eyes; this is his heart's darling, his own child. After all, one little kiss of the innocent baby lips is worth all the wild, wicked, passionate embraces of any woman going; and yet, his own folly, his madness, his sin will plant shame on the dear little golden head, and divide it from the breast on which it now rests.

"Will May be sorry if Papa goes away!" he asks, wistfully, and his heart gives a

great leap, as the child, still crunching her chocolate creams, answers,

“No!”

“No!”

“Cause Mamma and May will go wid him,” she says, with a knowing toss of her curls, “and Chester would go too, if he wasn’t asleep!”

“Mamma can’t go. Will May go with Papa and a pretty lady, who will give May lots of creams; or will she stay with Mamma?” he asks with a sharp jealousy.

“Stay wid Mamma! Papa can leave pretty lady and come here, and May will kiss oo ever so many times.”

“My God! if I could, if anything would stop this damnable business,” he cries aloud, catching the child to him and holding her as if he cannot part with her; his heart feels nigh to bursting, all the cold *nonchal-*

ance of a man of the world breaks down under "one touch of nature."

"Good-bye, my little darling, my pet! put your arm round Papa's neck and say, 'I love you;' 'I will never forget you,' for pity's sake!" he cries, feverishly.

She opens her eyes wide in surprise at his unusual manner; then two little chubby dimpled arms clasp round his neck.

"I love oo!" she lisps. "Has Papa been naughty?"

"Why?"

"'Cause he has been crying!"

It is true, and it is no shame to his manhood; all the very best and truest emotions of his nature are paramount at this moment.

He loves his wife, whom he is going to leave. He positively dislikes the woman he is about to take unto himself.



But it is too late! He is not the first man or the last that has said this in passionate bitterness of feeling.

“May must give Mamma this,” he says, in a broken voice, and he puts a scrap of paper into her little palm, “and this kiss from Papa.”

And putting her down, he sends her away to her mother.

And when Lady Ennisford opens the paper with just one word written inside it, “Forgive!” Lord Ennisford has left her for ever.

“Papa sent kiss too!” and May puts up her mouth.


“Ah, God! ah, God!”—

This is the cry in her soul, but she says nothing, and only sits with the hunted look of a dumb animal in her poor eyes.

## CHAPTER IX.

### AYLMER VERSUS AYLMER AND ENNISFORD.

“While winds of autumn go wailing  
Up the valley and over the hill,  
Like poor ghosts round the world sailing  
In search of the old love still !  
The waves of a mighty sorrow  
Have 'whelmed the pearl of my life,  
And there cometh to me no morrow  
To solace this desolate strife.  
Gone are the last faint flushes,  
Set as the sun of my fears,  
And over a few poor ashes  
I set in my darkness and tears !”

“AYLMER *versus* Aylmer and Ennisford” is the *cause célèbre* of the season. But, after all, those that flock eagerly to hear the “shocking details” with unhealthy curiosity are wofully disappointed, for there is no defence set up. It is not even a nine days’ wonder, like most things, for, two days after the

announcement of the *decree nisi* in the papers, all the world hears with amazement and horror of the frightful suicide of Lord Herbert Graham. "This awful event has caused the greatest consternation in our fashionable circles, among which Lord Herbert was so popular. He was only twenty-two, with the promise of a brilliant diplomatic career before him, and no clue to the motive for suicide has been discovered," says a society journal.

But three people know better.

One of these is a woman living like a recluse in the heart of the country. She reads the paragraph, and guesses at once *who* has wrought this evil work, and, dropping on her knees, puts up clasped hands for her husband. "God forgive him!" she prays, "for he knew not what he did!"

Elizabeth Payne, bound to the bedside of her crippled mother, sees the news, too, and remembers the levity with which Lady Aylmer spoke of these poor brains of Bertie's shattered for her sake.

And in a suburban lodging-house another woman pours over the account in a penny sensational paper that dwells on the harrowing incidents with a vivid realism that thrills the reader with horror. But when Bella has finished the paragraph she laughs. "*This* will strike home to you, Cain, and make you hate *her*, if you don't do it already!" and, folding up the paper, she encloses it in a cover, seals it carefully, and addresses it in her big, bold writing to "The Most Noble the Marquis of Ennisford, Athenæum Club."

Cairo does not prove a land flowing with mental milk and honey to the fugitive

couple, neither do Alexandria or Malta, all of which places they try.

"Under the social ban" does not promise cheerfulness to say the least; and Lord Ennisford, brimful of insular reserve and sensitiveness, shrinks from the cool unrecognising stare his fair and frail companion evokes from a whole host of fashionable tourists who swarm on the banks of the Nile, and in the orange and lemon gardens of San Antonio.

Sulky with her, with himself, and with the whole world in general, he hurries like a second *juif errant* from spot to spot, seeking peace and finding none.

Even his beauty grows somewhat dimmed under the tax this unlucky *esclandre* has put on him, and Bella is fully avenged, for his sin has already found him out. Florence is their next abiding place, but

even here the ardent sun of the south fails to reignite the ashes of a dead love.

For the love between these two is dead, though they hang on together by a chain of circumstances.

It is the spring of the year, but the convents embowered in dense green, the lofty mountains crowned with tropical verdure, the broad succulent leaves of the fanlike foliage, the gleaming palazzos and terraces, and the glorious nimbus of golden sunlight on the far distant Alpine peaks, make the fairy beauty and brilliancy of the scene a marvel.

But Lord Ennisford is past scenery. A good hunting morning, with a southerly wind and a cloudy sky, *locale* old England, would be far more agreeable to his eyes than the splendour and glamour of Italy.

Yet the splendour and the glamour are like strays from Paradise.

The golden day draws softly to a close, and a million sweet sounds and perfumes, fraught with the aroma of the enchanted south, steal through the open jalousies.

Outside vast skirted clouds gather together and form a harmony of colour for which language has no name.

Lord Ennisford lies back in an easy chair with a decided shadow on the eyes that stare rather blankly at a luxuriant orange tree, laden with golden fruit, that stands in the centre of the Pallazzo garden.

Presently, it gets too dark to see out, the boughs of the orange tree assume weird fantastic shapes, and long bars of gloom trail down over the earth. So, striking a fusee, he lights a cigar, sticks his feet on an

opposite chair, and falls into a train of thought.

He is paler and thinner than he was wont to be, but his face is as handsome and even haughtier, as he has grown to lift it loftily, in feigned scorn of his social ban.

He is not well in mind or body—the fire of pleasurable sensation is fairly burnt out, and from its smouldering crater rises a changed man; a man who, if he had a chance, would probably now make a model husband and father.

But the woman for whom he wrecked his life flourishes like the green bay tree.

No single tint of her loveliness is faded, for she is a woman who knows how to take care of herself.

It is, in fact, her supreme object of existence.

Kingdoms may rise and fall—fire, pesti-



lence, and famine desolate the earth, the closest friend drop dead by her side, but just the same—the supreme business of her life is to take care of herself. No human being can achieve a more general success than she has, but in the process she has not left a ray of glamour hanging about her face, her words, or her ways, to the man whom she has enthralled and ruined.

Just as he wearies of his thoughts and settles himself for a *siesta*, the doors of the spacious room are flung wide open, and two footmen, carrying lights, enter ; behind them comes Lady Aylmer, and behind her Lady Aylmer's French maid, carrying her mistress's fan and bouquet of violets and syringa.

Then, like jack-in-the-box, the servants disappear as suddenly as they came, and

the happy pair, who have defied all laws of God and man, are left *tête-à-tête*.

He looks at her for a moment carelessly, then averts his glance and knocks the ashes off his half-consumed cigar.

And yet she is quite lovely enough to hold the gaze of any man's eyes.

One slender satin-covered foot peers and pats out from her trailing skirts. The pink flesh tints of her superb arms are thrown out in lustrous relief by the soft blackness of the rare laces that envelop her. A small tiara of emeralds and diamonds (the same that she wore at the ball at Annerdale House when Lady Ennisford eat her heart out from jealousy) crown the thick glittering coils of her hair, beneath which the exquisite face looks out with a fairness all its own. Strings of emeralds go round her neck and wrists, and her

long lissom fingers toy lazily with her fan.

"Going out again?" he remarks, indifferently. He does not care, for his own society is pleasanter to him than hers, and that is not saying much for it.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"To the Marquise Rosa de la Terre's!"

"The Marquise Fiddlesticks, more likely! 'A mystical rose of the mire,' " he quotes, contemptuously. "Can't you stay at home one night even?"

"Well, no; I don't think I can. It's too utterly flat, you see."

"I am sorry my society is of so little account, Edith," he says, haughtily.

"I never pretended that the society of one man *was* sufficient for me; it isn't, no more than the society of one woman was

enough for you—any way, a silent one. I am sure you know by five years' experience what a bore the ceaseless company of your wife was. If *I* was inclined to mope, and you inclined to be gay, you would leave me to my own meditations, *I* know ! If I go out I shall have something bright to talk to you about, and it will be your variety to see me. You don't need me a scrap more than I do you ; and freedom, you know, is the one absolute privilege of existence to me as well as to you." And Lady Aylmer, as we must call her by courtesy, having disburdened her mind of this small oration, stands revolving before a long pier-glass, gratifying herself with the glitter of her emeralds and diamonds, and the perfect swirl of her trailing skirt.

"It hangs all right, doesn't it?" she asks, pirouetting like a *coryphée* before

the easy chair on which Lord Ennisford lies back inertly, with scornful half-closed eyes, sending up volumes of blue smoke to the frescoed ceiling.

“I’m not your *modiste*—ask your maid,” he answers, curtly.

“No, you are a bear, an ill-tempered, rude bear! I say, Ennisford, what on earth made us think we could pull together? we haven’t a feeling or an idea in common. What geese we were! When I think of the past——”

She pauses and frowns, and he catches a look from the magnificent sapphire eyes that certainly does not betoken *love*.

The old wave of passionate heat flushes his white face, and his blue eyes gleam up with a curious light. Her words have roused the demon slumbering in his heart.

“The past—God! don’t speak of it, for

it drives me just mad," he exclaims, jumping up from his lounge and gasping, as he leans a moment out of the window.

Somehow this lovely woman looks to him like a devil, a beautiful wicked devil, as she still parades her charms before the glass with an overweening vanity that positively sickens him.

"So! the retrospect doesn't please you, my lord," she cries, mockingly, turning and looking him full in the face. "Ah, well!" and she gives a sigh of insufferable weariness. "It can't tire you more than it does me, this looking back. Why on earth didn't we have our love passage, live through it, and part when it was over—free, both of us, to go where we listed? I don't think now, do you know, Ennisford, that I *really* cared to go away with you like this. If you could have persuaded

your wife to divorce you now, I should have enjoyed being Duchess of Bramber by-and-bye."

"Stop that folly!" he thunders. "Divorce or no divorce, you would never have been Marchioness of Ennisford, much less Duchess of Bramber! I would rather shoot myself than trust the old name and my honour in your hands!"

"Honour!" and she laughs, a rippling, careless laugh. "*Honour!* Listen to him talking of things he doesn't even know the meaning of!"

"Edith, if you provoke me like this, I am sure I shall murder you one of these days!" he cries, hotly, shaking with passion from head to foot. "Oh, when I think what an ass I have been—what a madman—I could cut my own throat!"

"Don't. It would break your wife's heart.

She is moping for you still, I dare say. Idiot that I was to intermeddle in her joy."

"I wish to heaven you had never meddled with me," he says, wearily, closing his eyes as if to shut out the sight of her.

"The woman thou gavest me—she tempted me, and I did eat,' runs the ancient fable. Of course, you didn't *want* to eat; oh no!" Lady Aylmer laughs, throwing herself on a low divan with robes afloat, white arms folded, and mockery on her childlike mouth.

"Yes, I did, curse me!" Lord Ennisford answers, with incisive bitterness.

"Well, you have survived it, and now you deserve to be eaten yourself for your ill-temper and discontent. After all it's me who ought to grumble. What have I had in exchange for all I lost?" she asks.

"Myself," and he draws his figure up and



looks as handsome as a god, "pray isn't that enough?"

She surveys him a moment coolly. Certainly "myself" is a strikingly good-looking man, and the fact of it softens her a little.

"*Céla selon*," she replies, carelessly, "handsome is as handsome does. Faces don't avail much if a man is a cad, you know."

Once more she rouses the British lion.

"And is it womanly to sit and insult a man because you have him at your mercy?" he cries, wrathfully; "if you were a man I would throttle you if you dared to talk to me like that. Have a care, Edith, one of these days you will goad me beyond endurance, and then you will see what stuff I am really made of."

"Yes, it takes time to penetrate to the

hidden beauties of your nature, and to discover the splendour of your mind, but it's eight o'clock and I must be off. *Buona notte, mio Signore!*" and she makes him a sweeping curtsey.

An hour later the diamonds and emeralds dazzle and glitter, and a slender hand toys with a fan set with the same jewels, above whose gleaming sheen the snowlidded purple eyes send out the old alluring looks, old as time, yet ever young to the responsive orbs of a handsome young Austrian baron, whose reckless and lavish ways have banished him temporarily from his princely home, to find, under the soft warm skies of Italy, a beauty far more *entrainante* than he has ever looked upon in the courts of kings.

"*Ah, ma Charmante!*" the Marquise Rosa murmurs to her guest; "where is your Milord? beautiful as one fairy prince. *Il*

*n'est plus jaloux je crois, c'est une mauvaise signe !* ”

“ *Une femme detestable !* ” Lady Aylmer whispers to her Baron, shrugging her fair shoulders, and in marking their dazzling whiteness, he forgets all about this “Milord.”

There is a mysterious sympathy between Bohemians that quickly overleaps all conventional barriers of coldness and reserve, and before this evening is over, young Oscar Von Lieven (whom, by the way, she has met frequently, lately, either by accident or design) tells her of his admiration in words as well as in looks.

“It’s living death to be tied to Ennisford,” she mutters to herself, as she drives from the Marquise Rosa de la Terres, down a long, lonely road that leads to the Palazzo, on the outskirts of Florence, which Lord Ennisford has chosen, chiefly on account of its perfect

isolation and seclusion. "*Triste*, discontented, savage as a bear, as he always is now! The world is wide, thank goodness, and a good-looking woman generally manages to get on. Somehow this young Oscar von Lieven has brought a breath of the old time back! the fun—the conquests, the jealousy of the women! Why on earth have I stayed in this place so long? A puff of air blowing across the Bois, or Rotten Row, would be quite an elixir!"

Meanwhile, when Lady Aylmer has left him, Lord Ennisford, flinging himself back in his easy-chair, and blowing out the lights, gives himself up to reflection in the dark silent room, that, spacious and barely furnished, like most Italian houses, seems full of weird, ghostly corners and embrasures. The wind, rising a little, rustles with a monotonous swish through the gold-laden boughs

of the fragrant orange tree ; a nightingale trills a roulade, clear and sweet, among the *bosquets* of flowering oleanders that skirt the quaint old garden, and the moon, pale and sickly, just shows her disc above the dark pinewoods that lie black and mysterious in the distance.

Once life gave to Lord Ennisford so much variety that it brought satiety, but now the days and the nights seem all alike to him.

With preternatural clearness of mental vision, he perceives at once the glory of life's fruition and the impossibility of its possession. He lives in retrospection and introspection, and his future seems to have no horizon whatever.

At last he knows what it is to be utterly "alone."

Since his birth he does not remember to have felt so horribly alone as he does to-

night. Lady Aylmer's talk usually ends, as it begins, in polite and smiling indifference or ill-bred taunts and recrimination ; for he and she have gained a perfect knowledge of each other, the infatuation for each other has long worn itself out, passion has lost its glamour, and sentiment has grown coarse and realistic.

Under no circumstances could the love of one man have sufficed long to such a butterfly nature as hers, for variety, power and pleasure are far more to her than love in any guise.

Ennisford cannot marry her and make her an embryo duchess, so he has nothing more to give than any other man, and his handsome face, which has enthralled her, she is tired of.

Unseemly words have passed between them to-night. He has spoken brutally to

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her—he is aware of that ; but who—surely not he—could bear that look of supreme disdain and mockery on her features and not feel a demoniac impulse to stamp it out?

There are moments, even in the lives of the most self-loving, when the veil of selfishness drops off, and the eyes of the soul introverted see everything as it is.

To a nature like this man's, this moment could never have come while his *senses* were in the ascendancy ; but passion has brought its punishment—a dreadful satiety, and with a full knowledge of the woman for whom he has spoiled his life, he makes up his mind to throw off his hateful shackles, and go out once more into the world free, at any rate, of the millstone round his neck.

To people who live for themselves, who never look beyond the hour of pleasure, it

is easy to break through all bonds to arrive at their end, and both Lord Ennisford and Lady Aylmer carry out their resolves without question of the other's feelings.

She, however, determines to throw over the Bois and the Row for an extravagant Austrian *ménage*, where we shall finally leave her to the tender mercies of the fickle Baron von Lieven; and Lord Ennisford, when he hears of her determination to part, is quite content it should be as it is. His conscience is appeased as he offers a handsome settlement, but it is repudiated with magnificent disdain.

Von Lieven is rich, and she will hold the strings of his purse as well as of his heart, *pro tem*. Thus, parody of life and love, these two, who have looked passionately into one another's eyes, lingered on each other's caresses, sworn eternal fealty, and



done the best they could to ruin each other's future, part amicably.

"Good-bye, Ennisford," she says. "I shall think of you with regret, for you *can* be awfully nice, you know. Go back, my dear boy, to your wife, and don't be such a fool as to leave her again. What you want is a woman who will sit at your feet and worship you all day long, and believe in you when you say black's white."

"Good-bye," he answers; "and Edith, if I did not know that if it had not been me, it would have been some other man, I should never forgive myself for having brought you to this. But it's a case of 'not Launcelot nor another,' you know."

She is leaning out of the window, plucking handfuls of pure white orange blossoms, and sticking them coquettishly in her hair

and on her breast; but she turns towards him as he has his "hit."

"Try and say something *nice* before we part, Ennisford," she asks, in a pathetic voice, though laughter sparkles in the rich purple depths of her lovely eyes, and laughter ripples over the sweet curved red lips, and he knows that the pathos is all put on.

"Say something *nice*, shall I, Edith? Well, here goes, and Swinburne inspires me; you like his poetry so much, you know.

'Breathe close upon the ashes,  
It may be flame will leap;  
Unclose the soft close lashes,  
Lift up the lids, and weep!  
Light love's extinguished ember,  
Let one tear leave it wet,  
For one that you remember,  
And ten that you forget!'

And he too laughs, as they shake hands, for he has not felt so happy for many a day.

## CHAPTER X.

### FACE TO FACE.

"I wonder where your life is passed,  
Or if in sun, or if in shade;  
If time has flown with silver wing,  
Or brought those flowers that bloom and fade?  
If you, like me, can still hope on,  
Believing all shall live again;  
Forgetting all the parted years,  
When pain was bliss, and bliss was pain!"

**T**HE men don't greet him very warmly as Lord Ennisford walks into the club one fine morning in May.

It may be that Lord Aylmer is the most popular man of the two, and certainly he is greater with the powers that be, for Marlborough House and the Duchesses and Countesses slur over his little love episodes and receive him with open arms.

And then, again, society is so kaleido-

scopical in town, that absence for several months is a sort of social death; but Lord Ennisford does not want to dive for the cause of his lukewarm reception. He merely holds his aristocratic head a shade or so higher. And, stalking majestically through the old familiar rooms, picks up a great packet of letters that await him, and saunters back to his lodging in Bury Street.

Here he swears a little at everything in general, and himself in particular, kicks the chairs about, calls lustily for a whisky and soda, and, with this by his side, settles himself down to look over his voluminous correspondence.

Many of these documents are six months old, for he had peremptorily desired that all letters for him should be detained at the club "till called for," and had taken care

to leave no clue to his address during his absence abroad, and had persistently avoided looking at a newspaper even.

One by one, he just glances at and chucks aside. Several are duns, or circulars, or common-place notes, but presently he arrives at a bulgy packet, sealed and addressed in that big bold hand, that he knows as well as his A. B. C.

“From that fiend, Bella!” he ejaculates, feeling more irate and warm than he has done before, “something vexatious or vicious, I’ll wager!”

He turns it round and round, he would not be surprised if it contained some deadly explosive; a curious impulse comes over him to destroy it unread, then, with a dash, he tears off the covering.

There is no writing inside, only a newspaper, dated 6th December, just six

months ago, and, perplexed, he opens it, glancing quickly over the pages until a big black cross meets his eye.

It is the sensational paragraph about Bertie's suicide.

At first he reads it in a dazed sort of way — dumbfounded — stunned; but suddenly he realises the whole horror of it. The wonder is that he does not shriek, the agony and tension of his heart is so horrible.

Instead of this, he spreads the paper on the table, carefully presses out the creases; then, with his hands supporting his head, he reads and re-reads, slowly, deliberately, word for word, line for line of the accursed paragraph, until they grow redder and redder before him, and poor Bertie's life-blood seems to stare him in the face and steep his senses.

“My God!” he groans, aloud, his knees shaking and his lips trembling violently. “*This* is punishment, indeed! Oh, Bertie! my poor boy, you did not know her or you would have spared me *this*! Oh, my God! I don’t believe I shall ever get over it, or be able to look an honest man or woman straight in the face again!”

And even while he mutters all this a new, strange sensation, an awful numbness creeps and creeps up his right arm to his hand, which, with the fatal paper in its grasp, falls nervelessly down.

For some minutes—for an hour, or hours—he knows not which, he sits there, his head stooped low, his eyes prone on the newspaper that stares up at him from the floor, a sickness unto death overmastering everything.

Then he tries to shake off the stupor

which holds him, and, pushing back his chair, rises to cross the room to the bell, but midway he pauses. An awful pallor spreads over his features; he flings out his left arm to clutch anything near, and falls down unconscious. And so they find him when the day is nearly spent.

“Ennisford has had a stroke!”

The news of this goes far and wide, and a few, remembering him in the glory of his manhood, utter a regret, but the many, with an expression of surprise, put him out of their memory; and he is better and able to be moved to Highcliffe when the tidings reach his wife in an out-of-the-way villa in which she has buried herself in one of the northern shires.

It has been a dreadful wrench to her to leave Highcliffe, to take her last look and say her last prayer at Chester's grave.



But when she found that her husband had really left her and was living with the woman who had bewitched him, she felt that she could no longer live under a roof that belonged to him.

On the evening of the day that she hears what has befallen him, a light burns late in the domicile she has chosen. Contrary to her custom, Lady Ennisford is not asleep at this hour beside her child.

A shaded lamp stands in the corner of the room, and by its faint light she sits, her arms locked tight, her head bent forward, her eyes fixed on the face of the sleeping May.

There is nothing weird or overwrought in her aspect, nothing wild or feverish in her gaze, for she is not of a stormy temperament; but yet there is a world of meaning in her eyes, and

the emotion which lives in her heart wells up in an expression of unutterable tenderness.

The child, as if conscious of the love brooding over her, stirs in her sleep and smiles, and throws her little white arms above her head, framing with them her beautiful face; the lids, with their long curling lashes, shut in the forget-me-not eyes; but every trait and outline and feature repeat her father's. There is the Greek profile, the roseleaf on snow complexion, the crinkling yellow hair, like spun gold.

"Ennisford's face, before time or evil had touched it!" Lady Ennisford murmurs, bending nearer. "Can I, oh can I give you up, my little one—my darling—my all! Yes, I can, for *him*! He must have you, I feel it. It is he who needs you even

more than I do *now* ; for he is stricken, and I am strong ! ”

As she leans forward, the lamp-light falls full on her face and proves her words true. Quite a pink colour, like a sea shell, tinges her cheek, and it is grown more rounded than before ; her large brown eyes are more luminous too. And it is not strange that this should be, for though she has suffered, suffered horribly all through, something has told her to be patient and wait for the end.

The wan, weary, ailing woman of months back belonged to a world of pain and jealousy and discord, but Lady Ennisford of to-day lives in concord with the harmonious elements. The seasons are her ministers, and her best companions the amber sunshine, the fresh mountain air, the delicious aromatic odours of the woods among

which she has elected to pitch her tent. Physical well-being shows in her face and figure, and the pure health of her soul shines out of her steadfast eyes.

May turns up her little features towards her mother, and her likeness to her father is positively startling. It seems as if he suddenly emerged from the far past, and looked just as he did under the moonlit Clavering oaks.

Then, suddenly, his wife's composure breaks down; the mystic spell of six years back draws the blood in torrents to her face, and makes her quiet eyes flash.

"My darling! my only love, it is *so* I remember you! Why was I not different that I might not have lost you? You are ill, helpless, yet I dare not go to you, to care for you and show you how utterly I

love you still! but the child shall go. She shall comfort you, and I—well! *I* can live alone to the end!”

Twilight still tinges the western blue, as a woman, closely cloaked and veiled, and with a child's hand in her own, steals through the familiar grounds at Highcliffe, and then up the stone steps at the back of the house. A light shines out on the piazza from Lord Ennisford's library, and, creeping softly up close to the window, she looks in.

He is alone.

The back of his chair is towards her, but his face in profile is distinctly visible from without. He lies back on an extended lounge, his figure entirely supported, and against the table beside him leans a crutch. One arm, the left one, is stretched listlessly out, and he gazes into the fire,

that sends up a blue curling flame, and sees visions.

Visions of a day that is dead.

Visions of a girl wife, whom he had certainly loved in the first halcyon days; he wonders now how he had had it in his heart to be harsh and selfish, and even brutal to one who had loved him so much that his lightest look had been her law!

It was because he was so selfish, he thinks, and had had no comprehension how much, how very much, such love was worth! but he knows now, to the deepest depth of his lonely heart, that it was worth more than all the world beside.

Then he thinks of Chester, of the poor lost boy, into whose little life swept so scantily a father's affection. It is in this very room that he looked upon him last, and as the small white face seraphic in

death comes back to him, he dashes away the moisture from his eyes.

Then May, his little May, he has not heard of her for months. She may be dead too, for aught he knows, but no! he thrusts the thought aside quickly. If he could but see her! but he has forfeited the right; he would give the world to see his wife again, but he knows there is no chance. He has sinned against her beyond recall!

Presently, his head droops forward, and there is such utter desolation in his attitude, such utter, utter loneliness in the room, that Lady Ennisford feels she can bear no more.

With shaking fingers she quietly unlatches the casement, and pushes in the wondering child, hiding herself behind the clustering leaves of a magnolia.

May is not a shy child ; she recognises her father in a moment, in spite of the havoc which his illness has made, and she minces in on tiptoe, thinking it fine fun to surprise him.

Stealing round the back of his low chair, she suddenly clasps her fat dimpled little hands over his eyes, and cries, shrilly,

“ Bo-peep ! ”

Then she dances round and faces him.

“ Great God ! ”

This is the only ejaculation of the occupant of the chair.

He grows deathly pale to the lips and trembles all over, as if palsy and not paralysis had seized him.

That the little creature, face to face with him, is in the actual flesh, it does not occur to him to think.

He recognises the features of his pet—



the child of his heart ; but he believes it is her wraith.

The child does not come nearer, and, alas ! he *cannot* go to her.

May, in truth, now that she comes to examine him, cannot understand that this stern, white man is really "Papa."

Papa, with his sunny forget-me-not eyes, his *insouciant* smile and gay laugh.

And so she half meditates a flight, when his voice reassures her.

"Won't May come and kiss Papa ? He is ill and can't go and kiss *her* !" Lord Ennisford says, piteously ; for he longs—longs with a feverish infinite craving, more than he has ever felt, for the taste of a woman's scarlet mouth—to have those sweet, pure baby lips laid upon his own.

He almost believes that such a caress will purge him of his sin !

With a bound, the child is on his knee, her arms round his neck, her soft little mouth kissing him.

Then, settling herself comfortably in his lap, she looks around.

"What's dis?" she questions, curiously, eyeing the crutch.

"Papa's leg!"

She stares at him in wonderment, then laughs.

"May knows!" she says, with a saucy look. "Not papa's leg! but 'ride-a-cock-horse' for May;" and, scrambling off, she races on it round the room.

"Come here, my pet."

Obedient at once, she seats herself on a footstool near him, and, as she looks up at him, a bright flush on her cheeks, her blue eyes shining like stars, her golden hair tumbling all round her

lovely face, he gathers her up close in his arms.

"My precious," he cries, and for the first time since he left his wife, a real ring of happiness sounds in his voice.

"And who brought May here?"

"Mamma!"

He starts a little, and a tinge of colour sweeps across his thin cheek.

"Mamma! where is she?"

"Playing hide and seek!" the child says, pointing to the piazza, and when he hears this, he covers his face with his hands for a moment—he feels so horribly ashamed, so dreadfully penitent.

"Ask mamma to come to me," he whispers in May's ear, in a tremulous tone.

"Oo go to her!". May ordains, dictatorially.

"I *can't*, my child!"

He says it so wistfully, and she, who listens to every word with bated breath and straining ears, stretches out her arms towards him in the darkness.

Ah, God, how she loves him, in spite of his sin and shame, loves him as much as if he were a good man, and righteous; and as she gazes, with her whole soul in her eyes, she sees him rise slowly and with difficulty, and in another moment May clings to her dress, and beside her stands a man, smitten with premature age, leaning on a crutch.

His curling yellow hair is streaked with grey, and his face is worn and lined with suffering.

But what does she care! what does she care!

When he and she had stood last in this

very room, neither of them had outpassed the glory of their youth.

He was dazzling as a god, in the untouched splendour of his manhood, but she was already wan and weary with her womanhood.

Now it is she who has the advantage. These months, though months of sorrow, have ripened not withered her, and the pure light within irradiates her sweet brown eyes, and suffuses her delicate soft features, kindling them into absolute loveliness.

And as he gazes at her, he wonders, for even his beauty-worshipping eyes are satisfied.

And it comes to pass a little later, when May, fretful and sleepy, has been consigned to the care of the old housekeeper, that Lady Ennisford, having got her husband

back into his chair, burrows her little brown head on his shoulder, and closes her eyes. Then she falls to dreaming all the old sweet girlish dreams of six years back, and, as she does so, her arm creeps round him, and there is no sound save the ticking of the clock, and the beating of two hearts. After all, let the dead past bury its dead, for these two have a long life before them.

"I love you! I shall *always love you*, Frances," says a voice that six years ago transfigured the earth into heaven for her with these same words.

"And I love you; I have never ceased to love you," she whispers back.

"I know! I do not deserve it, for I have been such a thorough-paced brute to you, Frances."

"No matter, it is all over now. And after all, Ennisford, to err is human," she

says, womanlike, making excuses for him.

"And to forgive, divine! but you were always an angel," he cries, fervently, and meaning it.

"Not an angel, dear, only——."

"My very own darling, who worships the ground I tread."

"Yes," she answers, simply and honestly.

\* \* \* \* \*

"That little Lady Ennisford has actually taken her husband back," says Mrs. Walsingham, shrugging her shoulders. "Women are such fools! How long does she expect to keep him?"

"Long enough to repent at leisure what she has done in haste," Mrs. Temple answers.

"He is not fit for a married man."

But he is.

He has had a surfeit of Beauty, and is

content with the helpmate God has given him. He goes to see Bella too, for, in his new-born happiness, he can forgive even her evil work.

And Bella meets him with a smiling, smirking face, and introduces herself to him as "Lady Ennisford," when she receives him in her room in a private asylum which she calls "Highcliffe."

"Quite incurable, and often very dangerous," the mad doctor whispers, as he hurries Lord Ennisford away.

THE END.









